THE THEOLOGY OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

A STUDY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY APOLOGETICS

By Lloyd W. Chapin, Jr.

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Cyril C Richardson

Dean of Graduate Studies

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INTRODUCTION

1. *Enlightenment Religion*

"What we have to realize is that in those years God was on trial," writes Carl Becker in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*.

> The affair was nothing less than the intellectual *cause célèbre* of the age, and one which stirred the emotions of men in a way we can with difficulty understand . . . . but everyone, the readers as well as the writers of books, was concerned to know whether there was a God to care for his immortal soul, or no God and no immortal soul to care for . . . . That was the question which, in this cynical age of reason, men could become heated over, a question debated everywhere--in books, in the pulpit, in the salons, at dinners over the wine, after the servants had retired--and we can no more think of a Philosopher ignorant of, or indifferent to, this question than we can think of a modern philosopher ignorant of, or indifferent to, the quantum theory.[1]

In England the religion generally in question was that type of rational Christianity embodied in the writings of John Tillotson, noted seventeenth century preacher and Archbishop of Canterbury; John Locke, the father of so many aspects of eighteenth century English thought; and Samuel Clarke, England's most prominent theologian and philosopher in the two decades after Locke's death. The Enlightenment religion for which they were the early spokesmen emerged from the confluence of several forces which had begun to make themselves powerfully felt in England by the end of the seventeenth century. One of these was the breakup of the church-dominated society of the medieval and Reformation periods. The wide religious diversity which came out of this breakup, particularly in such countries as England and Holland, made greater toleration necessary if nations were to preserve a measure of social harmony. Men, weary of religious warfare, sought increasingly to find a common creedal base upon which all rational men could stand together regardless of their theological and ecclesiastical differences.

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[1] Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), pp. 73-74.

The spirit of toleration made possible an atmosphere in which new ideas could grow and flourish. Most potent among these were the new science and philosophy. The researches of such men as Johann Kepler, Galileo Galilei, and Sir Isaac Newton, using Sir Francis Bacon's method of testing hypothetical generalizations by inductive experiment, had demonstrated that the earth was not the focal point of arbitrary divine action, but a tiny part of a vast system governed by unchangeable law--a finding which undermined respect for truth claims based on special revelation and tradition, and promoted the credit of autonomous human reason. In the philosophical sphere continental thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz insisted that truth must be measured by clear and distinct ideas, while in England Locke maintained that the data of experience tested by reason was the only source of knowledge. All contributed to the Enlightenment belief that every claim to truth, even religious truth, must meet the criterion of reason.

Traditional orthodoxy itself had contributed to the growing emphasis upon the authority of reason. Thinkers as different as

Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin had had a place for natural theology in their systems, and the "scholasticism" which marked much of post-Reformation Protestant theology was profoundly rationalistic in spirit.

Another factor which shaped the Enlightenment approach to religion was the new knowledge of non-Christian religions acquired through the geographical explorations and colonizing activities of England, Holland, and France. The reports of traders and missionaries of hundreds of millions of Chinese, Indians, Persians and other peoples who had never heard of Christ made Europeans more keenly aware of Christianity as a minority movement and spurred the tendency to try to establish the elements common to all religions.

In England Tillotson, Locke, and Clarke sought to maintain a harmony between this new spirit and traditional Christianity--between reason and revelation--between the "naturalism" of the new science and the "supernaturalism" of the Bible. All three of them agreed that the principal aim of religion is to promote moral virtue. Unaided reason, they claimed, is capable of demonstrating the existence of God, men's moral obligations, and the certainty of future rewards and punishments; but, unfortunately, reason had proved ineffective in preventing licentiousness and idolatry; therefore, God has supplemented reason with special revelation. The purpose of the latter is not to destroy or correct religion based on reason, but to make it clearer and its moral sanctions stronger. Revelation is understood as propositional truth; faith is intellectual assent. Christ is the Son of God, the Messiah, sent to convey these truths to men. The tests of revelation are of two kinds--internal and external. Internal evidence consists of showing that a revealed truth is both conformable to reason and conducive to virtue; external evidence consists of miracles performed by the bearer of the revelation and prophecies fulfilled.

Several characteristics mark such a position and Enlightenment religion in general. One characteristic is reductionism. Religious belief is reduced to those essentials which all rational men can accept. Related to this is the emphasis upon morality; the principal aim of religion is not reconciliation with God but a virtuous and socially useful life. God's existence is not doubted. Indeed, only a supremely wise, powerful, and beneficent mind can account for the marvelous order of the universe. But the Author of Nature is a deity increasingly remote from the historical scene who interrupts the orderly functioning of his handiwork only when absolutely necessary. The doctrine of the Trinity appears increasingly difficult to justify on rational grounds, and there is a corresponding emphasis on the Divine Unity. The Christological tendency is Arian--Christ is not God, but he is superior to man; he is venerated primarily as divine messenger and moral example rather than as atoning Savior. Contributing to this "low" Christology is Enlightenment religion's optimistic view of human nature, for the corollary of the high evaluation of man's reason is a high evaluation of his moral capacities. One needs chiefly to exert oneself in order to live rationally and, thus, virtuously; therefore, one looks to Christ for instruction and inspiration, not redemption.

This kind of rational Christianity, which sought to harmonize reason with supernatural revelation, had widespread influence in eighteenth century England both within the Established Church and Nonconformity. Prominent among Anglican spokesmen were William Wollaston, John Jackson, John Conybeare, Benjamin Hoadly, Arthur Ashley Sykes, Thomas Sherlock, and, in the latter part of the century, William Paley. The Dissenters, necessarily committed as they were to toleration, were even more open to liberalizing tendencies, although more Presbyterian and General Baptist congregations moved in this direction than did Independent and Particular Baptist. Influential Dissenting spokesmen for a moderate rational supernaturalism in the first half of the century included Philip Doddridge, Isaac Watts, John Leland, John Taylor, and Nathaniel Lardner.

But this synthesis of reason and revelation did not go unchallenged. As James Hastings Nichols has observed,

> Against the mechanical regularity of the new world image, the biblical miracles stood out with a stark exceptional irrationality they had never before possessed. Time and space, again, had now exploded to such vast dimensions that the story of salvation from the creation to the Last Judgment contracted to an imperceptible spasm on a grain of sand on the cosmic seashore.[2]

In 1696 John Toland fired the opening salvo of the so-called "Deist" attack on the rational supernaturalism of Locke and Tillotson in Christianity Not Mysterious. He did not deny special revelation, but insisted that the content of such revelation must be strictly rational. It was not far from this position to that of Matthew Tindal who implied that special revelation was a superfluous repetition of the teachings of natural religion, and unworthy of the beneficent Author of Nature who had surely made his truth equally accessible to all. Anthony Collins launched the attack on the external evidences for revelation by marshalling all the evidence against the literal fulfillment of the biblical prophecies. Thomas Woolston dared to ridicule Christ's miracles as the marks of a sorcerer or wizard, if they were to be believed at all, unworthy proofs of his divine authority.

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[2] James Hastings Nichols, History of Christianity 1650-1950 (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p. 98.

But the heat of the Deist controversy faded in England in the 1740's. In a sense, their attack upon revealed religion had failed. Their assumption of a universal religion of nature easily accessible to reason did not do justice either to the complexity of nature or to the limitations of the human mind. Their inadequate sense of historical development led them to blame all irrational beliefs on fraud and "priestcraft"--a charge easily refuted. And yet their impact was profound. They revealed the internal tensions within the synthesis Tillotson, Locke, and their successors were seeking to effect. If they failed to offer a satisfactory substitute faith, they at least had showed that the supernaturalism of the Bible and of traditional Christianity was not so easily reconciled with the new scientific and philosophical ideas as their opponents thought.

The intellectual responses to this outcome of the controversy varied. William Law reacted by flatly denying the power of reason in the realm of religion; God is above man's comprehension. George Berkeley proposed an epistemological idealism which, by asserting apparent material reality to be ideas in the mind of God, offered orthodox theology an escape from a mechanically ordered universe. Joseph Butler labored to show in his massive Analogy of Religion that because natural religion is fraught with mysteries and difficulties analogous to those encountered in revealed religion, the latter is as believable, on rational grounds, as the former. Such a defense of revelation was an effective answer to the Deists, who shared Butler's assumption that there is sufficient evidence of nature as the work of God, but, by dwelling upon the complexities and uncertainties inherent in religious belief, whether natural or revealed, this great apologetic work, paradoxically, contributed to outright religious skepticism. Such skepticism, or "infidelity," found powerful expression in the philosophical treatises of David Hume and more indirectly, but no less powerfully, in Edward Gibbon's account of the rise of Christianity. Voltaire, after a visit to England from 1726 to 1729, carried the Deist attack against revealed religion to the continent where, by the 1770's, thinkers like Helvétius, Holbach, and Diderot were advocating outright atheism.

The most influential response from within the church to the challenge of anti-Christian rationalism was the movement known as the Evangelical Revival, whose principal spokesmen were John Wesley in England and Jonathan Edwards in America. Both, although one as an Arminian and the other as a Calvinist, reasserted the traditional emphasis upon human sinfulness and the necessity of grace. Both reaffirmed the importance of experience and emotion--"religious affections"--in attaining religious certainty. And both contributed powerfully to the growth of the revivalist spirit which helped to stem the growing tide of indifference, if not outright hostility, to religion.

But there was another movement which also sought to defend revealed religion against the challenge of rationalist skepticism in the latter part of the eighteenth century--Unitarianism--whose leading theologian was Joseph Priestley. An analysis of Priestley's defense of Christianity will be the burden of this essay; however, it should be noted here that Unitarianism, or Socinianism as it was sometimes called after its most prominent sixteenth century exponent, the Italian Fausto Sozzini (Socinus), had had, if one defines it broadly as anti-Trinitarianism, representatives in England since the reign of Elizabeth. During the religious conflicts of the civil war anti-Trinitarian views had become more evident, and, despite the prohibition by the Toleration Act of 1689, Thomas Emlyn, the first preacher openly to call himself a Unitarian,[3] gathered a London congregation in 1705.

As already pointed out, Enlightenment Christianity's view of Christ as that of teacher and example rather than as savior encouraged tendencies toward a low Christology. Samuel Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) demonstrated that the Bible did not support Trinitarian doctrine, and although Clarke himself did not advocate any particular Christology, the effect of his work was to strengthen all kinds of anti-Trinitarianism, both Arian and strictly Unitarian.

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[3] Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 247.

Dissenting congregations, free to determine their own orthodoxy, proved particularly susceptible to anti-Trinitarian tendencies and, through the first half of the eighteenth century, "low" Arianism spread steadily among them. Representative of this movement were Nathaniel Lardner, who, although never ordained, was counted the most learned Nonconformist theologian of his day, and his London ministerial colleagues, Samuel Chandler, James Foster, Caleb Fleming, and George Benson. Lardner, along with Fleming and Benson, ultimately adopted Unitarianism. Other prominent Arian Dissenters in this period were John Taylor of Norwich, noted for his criticism of the doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, and Micaiah Towgood of Exeter.

But by the middle of the eighteenth century the churches of liberal, or rational Dissent still lacked an organization to spread their principles and increase their scope. They had no commonly acknowledged leader, no common plan for the future, no clear sense of theological mission. They had also ceased to grow in numbers or strength.

> In short, they were like a ship that has outridden a heavy storm and reached calm waters, but is now hardly more than drifting, with no captain at the helm, and no definite port in view. The chances were that the movement would in a generation or two quietly fade away unless it could have guidance from wise and clearsighted leaders, and become conscious

> of a distinctive contribution to make to the religious life of the time.[4]

It was Priestley who gave to liberal Dissent new theological vitality in the second half of the century. It was also Priestley, along with Theophilus Lindsey, and their successor Thomas Belsham, who provided the Unitarian movement its leadership.

2. Biography

It will be more appropriate to treat the various influences on Priestley's thought later in this essay in direct connection with specific doctrines; however, a brief outline here of his career will help to place his theological efforts in perspective. He was born on March 23, 1733, in the hamlet of Fieldhead about six miles southwest of Leeds, the first child of Jonas and Mary Priestley. His father was a poor domestic clothmaker. After his mother died in 1740, having given birth to six children in seven years, his father's sister, Sarah, the wife of well-to-do John Keighley of Heckmondwike, adopted him. His aunt, to whom he was devoted, was a strict Calvinist, as had been his mother, but her home was always open to all the Nonconformist ministers in the neighborhood, so that quite early Joseph became aware of the more liberal theological tendencies at work among the Dissenters.[5] He did not, however, escape the sense of oppression common to sensitive Calvinist children.

> Believing that a new birth, produced by the immediate agency of the Spirit of God, was necessary to salvation, and not being

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[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.

[5] See *infra*, p. 190.

> able to satisfy myself that I had experienced anything of the kind, I felt occasionally such distress of mind as it is not in my power to describe, and which I still look back upon with horror.[6]

His reaction against such miseries left him with "a peculiar sense of the value of rational principles of religion,"[7] while his acquaintance with the unorthodox ministers who visited his aunt's home showed him that even heretics could be "good and honest men."[8] His later devotion to both reason and toleration in religious matters no doubt derived in large measure from these childhood experiences.

Priestley's education until the age of sixteen was in conventional grammar schools where he studied Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Signs of tuberculosis then prevented him from entering more advanced studies for three years, but during that time he began to teach himself French, German, Italian, Chaldean, Syriac, and Arabic, and received instruction in mathematics from a nearby Independent minister. He also began to develop an interest in scientific studies. His health having improved, he decided to enter the ministry and enrolled in 1751 as the first student in Daventry Academy, one of the university-type of institutions established by Nonconformists to compensate for their exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge. Daventry was the successor to Philip Doddridge's distinguished Northampton Academy. The two tutors, Caleb Fleming and Samuel Clark (eldest son of Samuel Clarke), encouraged critical thought by taking the opposite sides on questions under discussion. Here Priestley, who generally took the unorthodox side, acquired, along with a taste for free discussion, an Arian Christology, doubts concerning the penal theory of atonement, and, under the influence of David Hartley's Observations on Man (1749), a belief in philosophical determinism.[9]

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[6] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley to the year 1795 Written by Himself, with a Continuation by His Son, J. Priestley* [1806], in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. John Towill Rutt (25 vols.; Hackney: George Smallfield, 1817-1832), I, Part I, 12. Hereafter all volume and page numbers given for Priestley's works refer to Rutt's edition. Dates in brackets refer to the original date of publication.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

In September 1755, Priestley took over a declining congregation at Needham Market, Suffolk, where his liberal theological opinions, proclaimed with an hereditary stammer, did not make him popular. His aunt gave him twenty guineas to pay the fee of a London doctor who claimed to cure speech defects. The cure did not succeed, but the business took Priestley to London for the first time where he made the acquaintance of George Benson, colleague of Nathaniel Lardner, and Andrew Kippis, another prominent liberal Dissenting minister, later editor of the Biographia Britannica. While at Needham Market he came to the conclusion that the authors of the Bible were not supernaturally inspired and that the orthodox doctrine of the atonement was without scriptural support. He submitted a treatise on the latter, along with a criticism of the reasoning of the apostle Paul, to Lardner and Caleb Fleming, and although Lardner disapproved the animadversions on Pauline dialectic, the two leaders of liberal Dissent were sufficiently impressed with the work on the atonement to support its publication. It appeared in 1761 as *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission*.[10]

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[9] See infra, pp. 221 ff.

In September, 1758, Priestley, hoping for a more congenial situation, became minister to a small congregation at Nantwich in Cheshire. To supplement his meager salary he invested in a few scientific instruments and established a successful school where, Passmore speculates, he may have been the first person to teach laboratory science to children.[11] He exchanged pulpits with Edward Harwood, Dissenting minister at nearby Congleton, during the summers. Harwood later became a prominent biblical scholar in Bristol and London and remained a lifelong friend, although he never proclaimed himself a Unitarian.

Priestley's success as a teacher at Nantwich and his knowledge of languages led to his appointment in 1761 as tutor of languages at the Dissenting Academy at Warrington, Lancashire. Here he taught in addition to languages, oratory, grammar, history, political science, economics, and law; and, in the course of his teaching, developed his own ideas about these subjects. In *An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life*,[12] published in 1765, he argued that British education ought to concentrate less on preparing men for academic and ecclesiastical posts and more on preparing them for participation in government and commerce. His *Lectures on History and General Policy*, written at Warrington, but not published until 1788 in revised form,[13] reveals how he sought to introduce his students to modern history and to the problems of commerce, law, and public administration. These works place Priestley among those in the eighteenth century who pioneered in the effort to reform education along more practical lines.[14] In *The Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761),[15] *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language, and Universal Grammar* (1762),[16] and *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777)[17] Priestley urged the virtues of a literary style marked by simplicity and directness. His *Essay on the*

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[10] See *infra*, p. 98.

[11] John A. Passmore (ed.), *Priestley's Writings on Philosophy, Science, and Politics* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 11.

[12] *An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life with Plans of Lectures on History and General Policy, on the History of England, and on the Constitution and Laws of England* [1765], XXIV, 7-25, 439-63.

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[13] *Lectures on History and General Policy* [1788], XXIX, 3-438.

[14] See *infra*, p. 245. One of his students gives the following appealing account of Priestley as a teacher: "At the conclusion of his lecture he always encouraged the students to express their sentiments relative to the subjects of it, and to urge any objections to what he had delivered without reserve. It pleased him when anyone commenced such a conversation. In order to excite the freest discussion, he occasionally invited the students to drink tea with him, in order to canvas the subjects of his lectures. I do not recollect that he ever showed the least displeasure at the strongest objections that were made to what he delivered; but I distinctly remember the smile of approbation with which he usually received them; nor did he fail to point out in a very encouraging manner the ingenuity or force of any remarks that were made, when they merited these characters." (Quoted by Rutt in *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 50.)

[15] XXIII, 1-118.

[16] XXIII, 119-252.

[17] XXIII, 253-526.

First Principles of Government (1768), written at Warrington, contained powerful arguments for religious liberty and against state control of education.[18] Jeremy Bentham acknowledged its influence on his own political philosophy.[19]

While at Warrington Priestley found it possible to visit London for a month each year. John Aiken, principal of the academy as well as tutor of divinity, introduced him to John Canton, a prominent schoolmaster and a leading figure in the Royal Society, who brought him into contact with an active London group of scientists and philosophers. With two members of this group, Benjamin Franklin, then in London representing the American Colonies, and Richard Price, the distinguished Independent minister then at Stoke Newington and after 1770 at the Gravel Pit meeting at Hackney, Priestley became close friends. Price later differed with some of Priestley's theological and philosophical opinions,[20] but they shared the same liberal outlook, particularly in politics.[21] Franklin encouraged his scientific interests and greatly assisted him in the publication of his first major scientific work, The History and Present State of Electricity, with Original Experiments (1767). In 1766 he was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society and awarded his only university degree, the doctorate of Laws of the University of Edinburgh.

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[18] See infra, pp. 250 ff.

[19] See infra, p. 250, n. 4.

[20] See infra, pp. 200 ff. and 239 ff.

[21] See infra, pp. 275-76.

Priestley's years at Warrington were happy ones. He married Mary, daughter of Isaac Wilkinson, an ironmaster at Wrexham and later at Bristol, in 1762. She was to prove a loyal and loving companion, and gave him a daughter and three sons.

The academy, however, did not flourish, and Mary's health began to fail, so that when in 1767 the liberal and relatively prosperous congregation of Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds invited him to become its minister, he accepted. For ten years his theology had not changed, but now, after reading Lardner's *Letter on the Logos* (1759), he took the final step from the Arianism of his Daventry period to Unitarianism. The defense of this position, and particularly his claim that it was the faith of early Christianity, involved him in a wide-ranging and prolonged controversy with which we shall deal later.[22] Priestley also became concerned about the declining zeal he discovered among liberal Dissenting congregations, and in a series of tracts written during this period he called for more devotion to religious education, a revival of celebration of the Lord's Supper and family worship, greater church discipline, and more courageous assertion of Dissenting principles.[23] He also sought to provide materials which would embody in a systematic and easily communicable form the leading doctrines of rational Dissent (hardly called Unitarianism as yet).[24] Earl Morse Wilbur, the modern historian of Unitarianism, writes that *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* "reached a circulation of 60,000 copies. From this date [1770] as a turning-point one can trace a revival of devotion and active zeal for their cause among the rational Dissenters."[25] Furthermore, Priestley's daring challenge to the legal learning of Sir William Blackstone in behalf of the rights of Dissenters projected him into the public eye during this period as a leading spokesman for religious liberty.[26]

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[22] See *infra*, pp. 192 ff.

[23] For example, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the Subject of the Lord's Supper* [1768], XXI, 249-92; *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, as such* [1769], XXII, 245-301, 530-32; *A Serious Address to Masters of Families; with Forms of Family Prayer* [1769], XXI, 449-73; *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of Church Discipline* [1770], XXI, 374-446; *An Essay on the Best Method of Communicating Religious Knowledge to the Members of Christian Societies* [1771], II, xxii-xxxii.

In 1769 Priestley founded the *Theological Repository*, a journal intended to encourage free inquiry in religion by being open to all who submitted scholarly papers on theological subjects. The more orthodox, however, disapproved of his willingness to accept articles from Deists and atheists, and, as a result, the magazine became primarily an organ of Unitarianism. It failed for lack of funds after three years, and was not resumed until Priestley re-entered the ministry at Birmingham. The editor contributed numerous articles. Others contributors were Richard Price; John

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[24] *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* [1770], II, 383-404; *A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture* [1770], II, 430-80; *A Catechism for Children and Young Persons* [1771], XXI, 559-72; *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 3 vols. [1772-1774], II, xv-xxi, 1-380. In 1783 he also wrote for use by avowedly Unitarian congregations *Forms of Prayer and Other Offices for the Use of Unitarian Societies*, XXI, 474-558.

[25] Wilbur, *op. cit.*, pp. 297-98.

[26] See *infra*, pp. 269 ff.

Aiken; Andrew Kippis; Samuel Badcock, Dissenting minister at Devon who later became an Anglican; Samuel Clark, Priestley's former tutor at Daventry and now of Birmingham; and other Dissenting ministers--Newcome Cappe of York; Paul Cardale of Evesham; Samuel Merivale, tutor at the Dissenting academy at Exeter; John Palmer, schoolmaster at Macclesfield; Thomas Scott of Ipswich; Joshua Toulmin of Taunton; William Turner of Wakefield; and the man who is usually ranked with Priestley as the principal leader of eighteenth century English Unitarianism, Theophilus Lindsey.

Priestley met Lindsey on a visit to Archdeacon Francis Blackburne at Richmond in 1769. Blackburne, a liberal minded Anglican, was the author of The Confessional (1766), an attack on the state requirement of subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles. Lindsey, also an Anglican priest, was married to Blackburne's step-daughter and was a prime mover in the unsuccessful Feather's Tavern Petition to Parliament in 1772 to abolish subscription to the Articles. After its failure he resigned his parish of Catterick and, helped by Priestley and others, opened an avowedly Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, London, in April, 1774. Here Benjamin Franklin worshipped as long as he was in England. In 1783 John Disney, a signer of the Feather's Tavern Petition who had adopted Unitarianism and resigned his parish at Swinderby in 1782, joined Lindsey as his colleague at Essex Street Chapel and succeeded him as sole minister ten years later.

At Leeds Priestley continued his scientific investigations. He wrote another history of science, The History of the Present State of the Discoveries Relating to Vision, Light, and Colours (1772), and began experiments in what became his principal scientific interest--chemistry. He devised a method for producing soda water--"a service," in T. H. Huxley's words, "to naturally, and still more to artificially, thirsty souls, which [they] . . . cannot too gratefully acknowledge."[27] In 1774 he published the first edition of Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air which he republished in a series of six editions through 1786, each time adding reports of his most recent work. During this period he discovered six new gasses, most notably oxygen on August 1, 1774, although it was the French chemist, Antoine Laurent Lavoisier, who, using Pristley's findings, provided the true explanation of combustion.[28]

After six years at Leeds Priestley accepted an attractive appointment as "librarian" to William Fitzmaurice-Petty, second Earl of Shelburne. His primary responsibilities were to keep Shelburne informed on topics arising in Parliament and to supervise the education of his sons. He had to assist him in this latter task Thomas Jervis, a Dissenting minister who later became a Unitarian, as did his younger brother John. Shelburne, one of the leading liberal Whigs, gave the Priestleys a pleasant house at Calne, but during the winter months Priestley himself stayed in London at

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[27] Thomas H. Huxley, "Joseph Priestley," Science and Culture and Other Essays (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1882), p. 107.

[28] For a recent treatment of Priestley's views on oxidation and an explanation for his continued defense of the phlogiston theory of combustion see Robert E. Schofield, "Joseph Priestley, the Theory of Oxidation and the Nature of Matter," Journal of the History of Ideas, XXV (April-June, 1964), 285-94. The standard account of his scientific work is in the biography by T. E. Thorpe, Joseph Priestley (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1906).

Shelburne House. His duties were not heavy and he was able to devote much of his time to study and writing, and to conversation with his friends. He attended Lindsey's Essex Street Chapel whenever possible, and occasionally preached there. Here he met Mrs. Elizabeth Rayner, a wealthy member of the congregation, who became a generous benefactress. He became a member of what Franklin called the "Club of Honest Whigs," a group sympathetic to the American Colonies, that met at the London Coffee House, and whose members included John Canton, Richard Price, and Edmund Burke, as well as Benjamin Vaughan, political aide to Shelburne and a former student of Priestley's at Warrington. He also enjoyed the friendship of Sir John Pringle, physician to the king and president of the Royal Society, who became a Unitarian, and John Jebb, an Anglican priest who resigned from the church in 1775 to become a physician and active Unitarian leader.

Priestley made his first and only journey to the Continent in 1774 in the company of his patron. They traveled through the Low Countries, then up the Rhine, and finally to Paris where Priestley spent a month before returning home. Here he met and dined with Lavoisier and Turgot, Controller-General for Louis XVI, and, spurred by the widespread infidelity he found there even among clergymen, determined to embark on what he considered to be his most important task--the defense of rational Christianity against both skepticism and what he considered to be corrupted orthodoxy.[29]

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[29] See *infra*, pp. 40 ff.

Also during his stay with Shelburne, Priestley wrote his first philosophical publication, An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense on Behalf of Religion (1774), a harsh attack on the Scottish common-sense philosophy.[30] By 1775, influenced by the psychological theories of David Hartley and the theory of matter set forth by Ruggerio Boscovich and John Michell, Priestley had become a materialist, and in two works published in 1777, Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit and The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated, he argued that materialism and determinism were the logical accompaniments to a Unitarian Christology.[31] Such bold assertions made Priestley an even more controversial figure and, perhaps for this reason, he and Shelburne parted ways, although amicably, in 1780.

Priestley moved to Birmingham to be near his brother-in-law, the ironmaster John Wilkinson, who provided him with a house. After a few months the pulpit of the theologically liberal New Meeting at Birmingham fell vacant, and Priestley was immediately called to fill it. His salary was not large, but the patronage of generous friends enabled him and his family to live comfortably. Among his benefactors were Mrs. Rayner; William Heberden the elder, a prominent London physician, member of the Royal Society, and a Unitarian; Samuel Galton, a Birmingham Quaker who manufactured armaments;

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[30] See infra, pp. 65 ff.

[31] See infra, pp. 221 ff.

Josiah Wedgwood, the potter; Samuel Parker, a London optician and Calvinist Dissenter who supplied him scientific instruments; and the leading layman in the New Meeting, William Russell, an exporter.

Priestley became a member of the Lunar Society, a group founded by Matthew Boulton, manufacturer and partner of James Watt in the mighty Soho works. The group met once a month on a night near the full moon for scientific, philosophical and literary discussion. Its leading members during Priestley's time included, besides Boulton and Watt, Galton, Wedgwood, probably Wilkinson, as well as Erasmus Darwin, physician, scientist, poet, and grandfather of Charles Darwin; James Kier, industrial chemist; William Withering, physician and botanist; and Richard Edgeworth, educational reformer.[32]

Another of Priestley's friends at Birmingham was Joseph Berington, prominent liberal Roman Catholic priest and later supporter of the French Revolution, who was then at nearby Oscott.

Priestley continued to be actively engaged in theological controversy. In 1782 appeared his most famous work, An History

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[32] See the recent and thorough study by Robert E. Schofield, The Lunar Society of Birmingham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). Galton's daughter, Mary Ann, afterwards Mrs. Schimmelpennick, remembered Priestley as "a man of admirable simplicity, gentleness and kindness of heart, united with great acuteness of intellect. I can never forget the impression produced on me by the serene expression of his countenance. He, indeed, seemed present with God by recollection, and with man by cheerfulness. I remember that, in the assembly of these distinguished men, amongst whom Mr. Boulton, by his noble manner, his fine countenance . . . , and princely munificence, stood pre-eminently as the great Mecaenas; even as a child, I used to feel, when Dr. Priestley entered after him, that the glory of the one was terrestrial, that of the other celestial; and utterly far as I am removed from a belief in the sufficiency of

of the Corruptions of Christianity, in which he sought to establish that Unitarianism was the faith of primitive Christianity and that many traditional doctrines are corruptions of the original revelation. The debate into which this book plunged him with the more orthodox will receive extended treatment later.[33] His attack at the end of the *Corruptions* on Edward Gibbon's explanation for the rise of Christianity in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* led to an acerb exchange of letters between the two.[34]

Nor did he abate his efforts in behalf of the Unitarian movement. In 1782 he sent Caleb Rotheram, Unitarian minister at Kendal, Westmoreland, to Montrose, Scotland, to answer the ordination request of William Christie, a merchant who had come under the influence of Priestley's writings, and who had organized a Unitarian society there. Christie later established a congregation at Glasgow, but followed Priestley to America in 1795 where he served Unitarian societies at Winchester, Virginia, and Philadelphia. Priestley revived the *Theological Repository* in 1784, although it failed again in 1788. New contributors were Joseph Bretland, Unitarian schoolmaster at Exeter; Edward Evanson, a former Anglican priest who had seceded in 1778 and become a Unitarian;[35] and Gilbert Wakefield,

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Dr. Priestley's theological creed, I cannot but here record this evidence of the eternal power of any portion of the truth held in its vitality." (Quoted by Huxley, *op cit.*, p. 110.)

[33] See *infra*, pp. 193 ff., especially pp. 203-20.

[34] See *infra*, pp. 177 ff.

[35] See *infra*, p. 121.

tutor of classics at Warrington and later at the New College at Hackney. Priestley selected the articles to be published with the advice of Samuel Blyth, his assistant minister at the New Meeting; William Hawkes, his recently retired predecessor; Radcliffe Scholefield and Mr. Coates, ministers of the Old Meeting Chapel; and John Palmer, formerly of Macclesfield, but now living in Birmingham. Priestley also projected a new version of the Bible in conjunction with Michael Dodson, a Unitarian London lawyer and biblical scholar; William Frend, Unitarian tutor at Cambridge and hero of the young Samuel Taylor Coleridge; and Lindsey. Priestley was responsible for the Hagiographa, but much of the manuscript was destroyed in the Birmingham riots and the project was not completed. In 1790 he published the first installment of his general church history.[36] Early in 1791 he joined Lindsey and Thomas Belsham, divinity tutor at the New College at Hackney, in the formation of the Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Practice of Virtue by the Distribution of Books, which prepared the way for an organized Unitarian denomination in England.

Priestley's unflagging advocacy of religious liberty led him into controversy with both William Pitt and Edmund Burke during his Birmingham ministry.[37] His outspoken support for the French Revolution coupled with his theological radicalism made him a prime target of the reactionary spirit which soon began to sweep England,

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[36] *A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire* [1790], VIII.

[37] See *infra*, pp. 273 ff.

and in July, 1791, a mob unrestrained by local authorities burnt both the Old and New Meeting chapels and pillaged the Priestley home.[38] The family, barely forewarned, escaped and, after staying for a few months in the homes of friends, settled at Hackney, just outside London, where Priestley was called to succeed the recently deceased Price as minister of the Gravel Pit Chapel.

In certain respects his stay at Hackney was pleasant and rewarding. His brother-in-law John Wilkinson supported him generously. His catechetical classes attracted large numbers. Lindsey and Thomas Belsham were near neighbors. He gave lectures in history and chemistry at the New College and continued his scientific investigations. In September, 1792, he was made an honorary citizen of France and elected a delegate to the National Assembly.

But an honor such as the latter only made Priestley more unpopular in an atmosphere increasingly hostile to France and to political and religious liberalism in general. His sons, finding all openings in England barred to them, emigrated to America in 1793, and in the following spring he and Mrs. Priestley followed. Young Samuel Taylor Coleridge, at that time an admirer of Priestley's, was moved to express his indignation:

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[38] See *infra*, pp. 278 ff. Priestley's support of the Birmingham industrialists' *laissez faire* economic policy also have contributed to his unpopularity with the laborers who made up the mob. See his *Some Considerations on the State of the Poor in General Prefixed to An Account of a Society for Encouraging the Industrious Poor* [1787], XXV, 314-19.

> . . . that dark Vizir Riot rude
> Have driven our Priestley o'er the Ocean swell.[39]

Thomas Belsham succeeded him as minister at the Gravel Pit Chapel and as leader of English Unitarianism.

Priestley's reputation and theology had preceded him to America. William Hazlitt, father of the noted essayist and a Unitarian minister, was a close friend of Priestley's who, during a stay in America from 1783 to 1786 had preached his theological mentor's ideas at Philadelphia and Boston, and, according to Wilbur, played a key role in persuading the members of King's Chapel, Boston, under James Freeman to adopt Unitarian worship and ordain their own minister.[40] The fact that Priestley, Lindsey, and other Unitarians had openly sympathized with the Colonies during the Revolution made their religious ideas more welcome. Lindsey, through Freeman, presented copies of Priestley's works to the Harvard College Library and from the late eighties onward the number of English Unitarian books in the Harvard library catalogue increased rapidly.[41] At Salem, Massachusetts, William Bentley, pastor of the East Church, was reading Priestley's views with approval by 1786 and had begun to preach them openly by 1791.[42] In 1793 Harry Toulmin, son of Priestley's colleague Joshua Toulmin of Taunton and himself a Unitarian minister, migrated to Kentucky where he advocated Priestley's theology and became successively president of Transylvania Seminary and later secretary of state for Kentucky.[43]

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[39] "Priestley," Morning Chronicle, December 11, 1794, in The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (2 vols.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 81.

[40] Wilbur, op. cit., p. 392.

[41] Ibid., p. 393.

The Priestleys landed in New York in June. No clergyman offered his pulpit to the controversial emigrant, but George Clinton, the governor, took the couple to his own church,[44] and leading New York societies sent formal addresses of welcome. After two weeks in New York the Priestleys proceeded to Philadelphia, then the national capital, where they were welcomed by Benjamin Rush, distinguished physician and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; David Rittenhouse, president of the American Philosophical Society; and John Vaughan, brother of Priestley's former pupil and friend, Benjamin Vaughan.

Priestley and his sons, along with John Vaughan and Thomas Cooper, a London lawyer and political essayist, had conceived of establishing a community on the banks of the Susquehannah River for

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[42] Ibid., pp. 394-95. Generally speaking, however, the anti-Trinitarianism which spread rapidly in eastern New England during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and which was to reach its clearest expression in the writings of William Ellery Channing was far less radical than Priestley's system, which combined materialism and determinism with an insistence on Christ's strictly human nature. American Unitarianism sprang in the main from sources within New England Congregationalism. See Conrad Wright, The Beginnings of Unitarianism (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).

[43] See Niels Henry Sonne, Liberal Kentucky 1780-1828 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), pp. 33 ff.

[44] See infra, p. 204.

English refugees from intolerance.[45] The plan was to fall through for lack of financial support, but before this became apparent the Priestleys had followed their sons to the village of Northumberland which lies at the meeting of the northern and western branches of the Susquehannah. Here they decided to settle. The pleasant white frame house Priestley built still stands and is open to visitors.

He held public worship in his house and after 1799 in a schoolhouse nearby, but the congregation apparently did not continue after his death. In November, 1794, he was offered the professorship of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania, but declined because of dislike for Philadelphia's climate and its high cost of living. He resolved, however, to spend portions of each winter there in order to aid the spread of rational Christianity and in hopes of establishing a Unitarian society. The following winter he was saddened by the death of his youngest son Henry, but he accepted an invitation to give a series of lectures in the Rev. Elhanan Winchester's recently completed Universalist meeting house in Philadelphia. These _Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion_[46] attracted a large and distinguished audience, including John Adams, then Vice-President, and many members of both Houses of Congress. Priestley enjoyed acquaintance with Adams, Jefferson, and Washington, and although Adams' conservative presidency later cooled relations between them,[47] he and Jefferson continued to share a mutual admiration. Priestley dedicated the second half of his *General History of the Christian Church*, published at Northumberland in 1803-04, to Jefferson,[48] and Jefferson, who relied heavily on Priestley's advice about the projected University of Virginia, declared him to be unexcelled for service "in religion, in politics, in physics."[49]

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[45] See M. C. Park, _Joseph Priestley and the Problem of Pantisocracy_ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947). It was news of this scheme which temporarily excited the hopes of Coleridge and Robert Southey to establish a "pantisocracy" in America.

[46] See _infra_, pp. 87 ff. It was in the course of these lectures that Priestley first proclaimed his belief in universal salvation. See _infra_, pp. 174-75.

During the summer following Priestley's lectures, a group of twenty-one English Unitarians led by John Vaughan and Ralph Eddowes, a pupil of Priestley's at Warrington, formed The First Society of Unitarian Christians in Philadelphia.[50] Priestley resumed his *Discourses* in the winter of 1797, despite the blows dealt him by the death of his wife the preceding autumn and the failing of his own health. But attendance at his second set of lectures was poor, perhaps because his novelty had worn off, and also because the growth of anti-French sentiment made association with this honorary French citizen ticklish. Priestley attempted no more public addresses in Philadelphia and did not even return to the city until after Jefferson's election in 1801. During Adams' administration the fiercely anti-French Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering, sought to have Priestley deported as an alien, but Adams prevented it, declaring his old friend to be "as weak as water . . . . His influence is not an atom in the world."[51]

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[47] See Zoltán Harazti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 280-90. Adams had met Priestley in London in 1786.

[48] *A General History of the Christian History From the Fall of the Western Empire to the Present Time* [1802-03], IX, 3-6.

[49] Quoted in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1948), p. 19. Boorstin discusses Priestley's influence on Jefferson's thought, especially pp. 158 ff.

[50] For a detailed account of the history of this group, the first permanently established and openly avowed Unitarian society in America, see Elizabeth M. Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism 1796-1861* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961).

At Northumberland Priestley pursued his scientific investigations and periodically communicated his findings to the American Philosophical Society. He also continued, up until a few days before his death, to write in defense of rational Christianity.[52] He devoted much of his time to demonstrating the superiority of Christianity to other religions,[53] but his letters to Lindsey and Belsham also reveal a deep interest in discerning how biblical prophecies may be reaching fulfillment in contemporary events.[54]

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[51] Quoted by Anne Holt, A Life of Joseph Priestley (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 203. Federalist hostility was stirred up against Priestley by William Cobbett, then in America and fiercely anti-Jacobin. In a series of pamphlets and newspaper articles from 1794 to 1800 signed "Peter Porcupine" he charged Priestley was a revolutionary working for the overthrow of both the English and American governments. See William Cobbett, Porcupine's Works (12 vols.; London: printed for Cobbett and Morgan, at the Crown and Mitre, Pall Mall, 1801), I, 151-215; VI, 411-12; VII, 149-50; IX, 245-78, 388-410; XI, 395-434. Priestley defended himself against these charges of subversion in Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland [1799], XXV, 109-87.

[52] See infra, pp. 48-49. A principal target was Tom Paine's attack on Christianity in The Age of Reason, see infra, pp. 56, 85-86.

[53] See infra, pp. 86 ff.

[54] See infra, pp. 175-76.

He also completed his notes on every book in the Bible.[55] Although living in Northumberland, a five day journey from Philadelphia, meant that Priestley was denied the varied and intellectually stimulating society he had enjoyed in England, he was not without companionship. His son Joseph and his family lived nearby, William Christie stayed with him in 1801-02, and Thomas Cooper, later professor of chemistry at Dickinson College and the University of Pennsylvania, and ultimately president of the University of South Carolina, brought his family to live with Priestley after Mary Priestley's death.[56] Priestley's own health failed markedly after a last visit to Philadelphia in 1803, and he died on February 6, 1804.

All those who have commented on Priestley's character and work praise his amazing intellectual versatility and energy, his courage and personal integrity, and his frankness. Augustus M. Toplady, a conservative Calvinist at the opposite theological pole, could nevertheless say, "I love a man whom I can hold up as a piece of crystal, and look through him. For this I have always admired Dr. Priestley."[57] It is true that his outspokenness sometimes proved to be tactically unsound, as in the Dissenters' campaign for religious liberty;[58] that his zeal to defend in print the causes he supported resulted in a verbosity and carelessness of style which often, but not always, makes him dreary reading today; and that his very versatility probably prevented him from achieving greatness in any single field; but without these qualities--boldness, ardor, and a boundless curiosity--he might never have made the important contributions he did to science, philosophy, education, political theory, history, and theology.

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[55] Notes on all the Books of Scripture for the Use of the Pulpit and Private Families [1803-04], XI-XIV.

[56] Priestley's relationship with the turbulent Cooper is treated in Dumas Malone, The Public Life of Thomas Cooper 1783-1839 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926).

[57] Quoted by Rutt in Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787, I, Part I, 32.

3. Studies of Priestley's Theology

The essay which follows undertakes to examine Priestley's theological teachings and convictions. It will be argued that an apologetic purpose--the desire to defend rational Christianity against its various opponents--was the decisive force in shaping his theology; and, therefore, that his thinking in this area is best understood as a response to the challenge to Christian belief which was, as we began by noting, a principal characteristic of the age. God was on trial in the eighteenth century. Priestley offered his brief for the defense.

There have been no other extended analyses of Priestley's theology. Thomas Cooper and William Christie added adulatory accounts of their friend's theological opinions, with lengthy extracts from his works, to the first edition of Priestley's

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[58] See infra, pp. 273 ff.

Memoirs,[59] but they made no effort at systematizing or analyzing his ideas.

In the nineteenth century Lord Brougham included an essay on him in *Lives of Philosophers of the Time of George III*[60] in which he declares that "his name will for ever be held in grateful remembrance by all who cultivate physical science,"[61] but dismisses his religion as "too much for those who had ceased to care for sacred things, and far too scanty for those who were still Christians."[62] Sir Leslie Stephen made a similar evaluation in *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*.[63] He discusses Priestley's religious ideas in more detail than Brougham, especially the Christological controversy with Samuel Horsley, but concludes that his "numerous series of dissertations . . . , with the exception of his scientific writings, bear the marks of hasty and superficial thought . . . . Pushing rationalism to conclusions which shocked the orthodox, he yet retained the most puerile superstitions."[64] Stephen does concede, however, that Priestley "may have in some degree facilitated the spread of a truer historical spirit" by his efforts to examine the development of doctrine.[65]

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[59] *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley, to the Year 1795, Written by Himself: With a Continuation to the Time of His Decease, by His Son, Joseph Priestley: and Observations on His Writings, by Thomas Cooper, President Judge of the 4th. District of Pennsylvania: and the Rev. William Christie* (2 vols.; Northumberland, 1806), pp. 465-824.

[60] Henry, Lord Brougham, "Priestley," *Lives of Philosophers of the Time of George III* (London: Richard Griffin and Company, 1855), pp. 68-90.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[63] Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962. First published in 1876: London), I, 364-73.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 364.

One might expect to find Unitarians treating Priestley more sympathetically than these two spokesmen for the British intellectual establishment, but in John James Tayler and James Martineau, professorial colleagues at Manchester New College and two of the leading spokesmen for nineteenth century Unitarianism, one finds high praise for Priestley's character, but considerable dissatisfaction with his theological influence. Tayler, in _A Retrospect of the Religious Life of England_, while denying that his dissent from Priestley's views "implies any insensibility to the magnitude of his services in the cause of religious truth, or to the great and heroic qualities of his character,"[66] nevertheless laments what he considers to have been Priestley's excessive reliance on "data _external_ to the mind" rather than on "intuition" as the basis for religious certainty.[67] By focussing on the empirical evidences for special revelation--particularly miracles--Priestley unnecessarily restricted the avenues by which men might become believers. He "laid too little stress on that universal sentiment of dependence on spiritual power and of reverential trust, which is co-extensive with humanity itself."[68] Unitarianism owes a debt of gratitude to Priestley and to his followers--Lindsey, Cappe, Jebb, Belsham, and others--for their devotion to the Divine Unity and to free inquiry in religion, but a "more spiritual conception of Christianity" was needed, and, owing "chiefly to the very seasonable influence of the writings of Dr. Channing" (and he might well have added Schleiermacher), a more spiritual view has prevailed.[69] Martineau's evaluation in "The Life, Character, and Works of Dr. Priestley" echoes Tayler's verdict by lauding Priestley's courage and versatility, but regretting his lack of "sensitivity," "poetry," and "solemnity."[70]

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[65] _Ibid._, p. 373.

[66] John James Tayler, _A Retrospect of the Religious Life of England_ (2d ed.; London: Truebner and Co., 1876. First published in 1845: London), p. 297.

[67] _Ibid._, p. 290.

The most appreciative nineteenth century treatment of Priestley's theological labors is by Alexander Gordon who gives an enlightening description of Priestley's theological development, emphasizing his importance as a "pioneer."[71]

> Save in his tenacious adhesion to the literal verity, and evidential value, of the miraculous element in the biblical narratives, and in his conservative estimate of the dates and authorship of biblical books, there is scarcely a point on

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[68] *Ibid.*, p. 293.

[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 297-300.

[70] James Martineau, "The Life, Character, and Works of Dr. Priestley," *Miscellanies* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1852), pp. 1-55.

[71] Alexander Gordon, "Priestley as a Pioneer in Theological Science," *Heads of English Unitarian History with Appended Lectures on Baxter and Priestley* (London: Philip Green, 1895), pp. 102-34.

> which the most independent of modern scholars can pride himself on having advanced beyond the outposts of Priestley.[72]

Gordon considers Priestley's "adoption of the historical method of investigating the problems of doctrine" his greatest contribution to religious thought.[73] Gordon also contributed a lengthy and informative article on Priestley to the Dictionary of National Biography accompanied by an extended bibliography of his non-scientific works.[74]

Two brief German dissertations have been written dealing with Priestley's materialism and determinism.[75] Neither deals extensively with his theological ideas.

More recently, Basil Willey in a good essay on Priestley in The Eighteenth Century Background views him as the last outstanding representative of the type of English thinker who sought to maintain the "holy alliance" between the most advanced scientific views and Christianity.[76] Ira V. Brown interprets his work in a similar vein in a summarizing article in Pennsylvania History.[77] Another example of this line of interpretation is Gerald R. Cragg's treatment of Priestley in Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century. He deals with him in a chapter entitled "The Appeal to the Authority of Science" where he also discusses David Hartley and William Godwin.[78] He sees Priestley's significance to lie in his use of the Newtonian mechanical world view and the empirical method of investigation to refashion theology. John Passmore, in the helpful introduction to his recent anthology of Priestley's works, stresses his versatility. He suggests that Priestley would probably respond to those nineteenth century writers who said he had too little appreciation for religious feeling by saying, "you mean--too little sentimentality."[79]

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[72] Ibid., p. 118.

[73] Ibid., p. 105.

[74] Alexander Gordon, "Priestley, Joseph," Dictionary of National Biography, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1909), XVI, 357-71.

[75] Bruno Schoenlank, Hartley and Priestley, die Begruender des Associationismus in England (Halle: Otto Hendel, 1882); Ray Addison Sigsbee, Das philosophische System Joseph Priestleys (Heidelberg: Buchdruckerei Klohe und Silber, 1912).

[76] Basil Willey, "Joseph Priestley and the Socinian Moonlight," The Eighteenth Century Background (London: Chatto and Windus, 1940), pp. 168-204.

Other writers have discussed Priestley's theology from special perspectives. Anthony Lincoln treats his philosophical and theological ideas as they bear upon his political theories.[80] He concludes that Priestley was instrumental in winning English Dissent to the cause of complete religious liberty and political utilitarianism.

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[77] Ira V. Brown, "The Religion of Joseph Priestley," Pennsylvania History, XXIV (April, 1957), 85-100.

[78] Gerald R. Cragg, "The Appeal to the Authority of Science," Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964), pp. 216-49. William Godwin, radical political theorist, prepared for the ministry under Andrew Kippis and, for a time, adopted Priestley's theology, but after 1785 he moved toward outright atheism, although retaining a belief in materialism and determinism.

[79] John Passmore, "Editor's Introduction," op. cit., pp. 7-37.

[80] Anthony Lincoln, Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent 1763-1800 (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1938), especially pp. 151-81.

Wilbur, in A History of Unitarianism, emphasizes his contribution to the revival of English Unitarianism in the latter part of the eighteenth century.[81] Robert R. Clemmer, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation on "Enlightenment Church History in the United States, 1800-1850," discusses Priestley's General History of the Christian Church, noting that, like other historical works of the period, it is dominated by polemical and utilitarian purposes--in this case Priestley's desire to use historical evidence to defend his own theological views.[82]

In addition to Gordon's article in the Dictionary of National Biography, two relatively brief but good biographies of Priestley have been written by T. E. Thorpe and Anne Holt. The former gives an excellent account of Priestley's scientific work, but attempts no theological analysis.[83] Miss Holt does discuss his theology, although her focus is on personalities and events. She praises his courageous advocacy of materialism and his effort to trace the origins of accepted doctrines, but says that his theology "was built on the sandy foundation of revealed religion"[84] and that in tracing the corruptions of Christianity "he scandalizes the modern historian, for he has made up his mind already as to what were the corruptions."[85] Thomas Huxley's entertaining essay portrays Priestley as an heroic battler for intellectual freedom.[86] John Graham Gillam's book, The Crucible, is an awkward fictional recreation of Priestley's adult life in England.[87] The primary source and most revealing introduction to Priestley's life is his own autobiography published with copious notes and correspondence in his Theological and Miscellaneous Works edited by John Towell Rutt, a wealthy London drug merchant, supporter of many Unitarian causes, and personally acquainted with Priestley.[88]

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[81] Wilbur, "The Liberal Dissenters Follow the Leadership of Joseph Priestley," op. cit., pp. 293-315.

[82] Robert R. Clemmer, "Enlightenment Church History in the United States, 1800-1850" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1961).

[83] T. E. Thorpe, op. cit.

[84] Holt, op. cit., p. 124.

Each of these works sheds light on Priestley's religious thought. But none attempt an extended analysis of it and none seek to demonstrate how Priestley's desire to defend Christianity against the intellectual challenge of his age affected his approach to every theological problem. Of course, every writer has noted this apologetic concern, particularly Willey, Brown, and Cragg, who emphasize Priestley's efforts to harmonize religion and science, but not even these have tried to show in any detail how he carried out his apologetic task. The essay which follows is an attempt to describe and evaluate Priestley's work as an Enlightenment defender of the faith.

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[85] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[86] Huxley, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-34.

[87] John Gresham Gillam, *The Crucible: The Story of Joseph Priestley* (London: Robert Hale, Ltd., 1954).

[88] See *supra*, p. 11, n. 6, and *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Life and Correspondence, 1787-1804*, I, Part II. John T. Boyer has recently republished the *Memoirs* (Washington: Barcroft Press, 1964). See also the original edition by Cooper and Christie, *supra*, p. 33, n. 59.

PART I

PRIESTLEY'S CONCEPTION OF THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

CHAPTER I

PURPOSE

When Priestley made his only visit to the Continent in the autumn of 1774 he was introduced at Paris to the galaxy of philosophers and scientists whose gatherings had made that city the capital of the Enlightenment. In his Memoirs he recalls that he found, as he had been forewarned, that all of them were unbelievers in Christianity, and that many were professed atheists. Such circumstances, however, failed to daunt the doughty little Yorkshireman, who resolved "on all occasions to appear as a Christian."[1] After further questioning, Priestley decided that their unbelief sprang primarily from misunderstanding. They "did not really know what Christianity was,"[2] and in order to defend its "genuine principles" it was necessary to "free it from those corruptions which prevent its reception with philosophical and thinking persons."[3]

It cannot be said that Priestley's zeal to demonstrate the intellectual respectability of Christianity first arose from this personal encounter with the Parisian intellectuals, since as early as 1768 in his third published theological work, A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper,[4] he had written,

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[1] Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley, I, Part I, 199.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 200.

> To me . . . it appears, that the present state of Christianity is rather critical . . . Men of good sense, and of cultivated minds in other respects, cannot but be aware of many things which are evidently absurd in the prevailing tenets of the far greater part of Christians; and . . . it can be no wonder that they conceive a prejudice against the whole scheme, and become secret, if not open and avowed infidels.[5]

A remedy, he felt, must be found, or else, "we shall, in time, be in the condition of our neighbours the Papists, with whom the thinking men, in the church as well as among the laity, are generally infidels, and all the unthinking are bigots."[6]

Nevertheless, his experience at Paris was the inspiration for his first book aimed directly at infidelity, Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever,[7] and it seems to have made a lasting impression on him. Samuel Rogers, the poet, recalled that fifteen years later Priestley told the story at the Hackney Club of how, when driving with Turgot, M. de Chastelleux, a travel writer, told him that

> the two gentlemen opposite me were the Bishop of Aix and the Archbishop of Toulouse,[8] "but," said he, "they are no more

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[4] A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the Subject of the Lord's Supper, XXI, 249-92.

[5] Ibid., p. 251.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I [1780], IV, 311-411.

[8] Boisgelin de Cucé and Lomenie de Brienne.

> believers than you or I." I assured him I was a believer; but he would not believe me; and Le Roi, the philosopher, told me that I was the only man of sense he knew that was a Christian.[9]

Moreover, the incident serves to dramatize Priestley's role in the intellectual world of the late eighteenth century--at least as he himself saw it--as a defender of an enlightened and rational Christianity against its cultured despisers. Indeed, as already stated, the thesis of this essay is that Priestley's theological teachings and convictions are best understood in the light of his concern to serve as an apologist for Christianity to the "philosophical and thinking persons" of the Enlightenment.

We conceive Priestley's apologetic aim too narrowly, however, if we limit it to the conversion of what he called "philosophical unbelievers." He was deeply concerned, throughout his life, with the religious education of young people, for, as he observed in one of his sermons,

> Ministers . . . should bestow their labor chiefly on the _young_, instructing them in the principles of religion . . . and making everything in religious discipline familiar to them. This is bending the oak while it is pliable . . .[10]

He believed that the superficial knowledge, or total ignorance, of rational religion among the youth of the present age was the reason for the fact that many of them were "daily falling a prey to enthusiasm [i.e. Methodism] on the one hand, and infidelity on the other."[11] His first major theological work, Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, was originally a set of lectures intended to instruct the children of his church at Leeds in the "sound principles of religious knowledge."[12]

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[9] P. W. Clayden, _Early Life of Samuel Rogers_ [1887], p. 266, quoted by A. Holt, _op. cit._, p. 94.

[10] _Discourses on Various Subjects_ [1787], XV, 98.

But Priestley's hopes extended further. He believed that a proper understanding of Christianity would lead even Jews and Moslems to acknowledge the error of their ways. In Letters to the Jews he suggested to his readers that

> Since . . . well-informed Christians believe in the same . . . God, with yourselves, it may be hoped that our mutual prejudices will in time abate, and that you will be prevailed upon to attend with calmness to the reasons that may be laid before you, why you should believe in the divine mission of Christ, as well as in that of Moses, and consider his religion as designed to be a blessing to the Gentile world as well as to you.[13]

As for the Moslems, it was clear that "the grounds and principles of that religion underwent no very severe discussion at the time of its promulgation, or early propagation," and that when such careful discussions took place between Moslem and Christian thinkers, and the common people were informed of them, "less than a century, I am persuaded [would] be sufficient fully to establish the credit of the one system, and to destroy that of the other." Which of the two must yield in the contest, Priestley, as a Christian had no doubt.[14]

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[11] An Essay on the Best Method of Communicating Religious Knowledge to the Members of Christian Societies, II, xxii.

[12] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, xv.

[13] Letters to the Jews [1786], XX, 229.

[14] Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in This Country [1785], XVIII, 547-48.

Priestley was also aware that there were many persons who, although they might consider themselves to be believers, were, in fact, "practical atheists" living "as *without God in the world*, entirely thoughtless of his being, perfections and providence."[15] Therefore, Priestley thought himself happy if "I have advanced anything that may tend either to lessen the number of speculative atheists, or, which is no less wanting, convert nominal believers into practical ones."[16]

A "practical believer" was one who combined correct theological principles with propriety of conduct, that is, he took his religious beliefs seriously enough for them to have effect upon his manner of life. Priestley, like many others in the Enlightenment, attributed more importance to good character than to doctrinal orthodoxy. Pope's couplet,

> For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight;
> His can't be wrong whose life is in the right
> (*An Essay on Man*, Ep. iii, l. 303)

reflected a common attitude. As deeply concerned as he was for a strictly rational theology, Priestley could still maintain that

> I always represent everything of a speculative nature as subservient to practice, and, indeed, of little or no use in any other view . . . Let others think and speak as they please of my zeal for particular opinions, the only test of true discipleship to Jesus . . . is that which our Lord himself has given, *By their fruits you shall know them* . . . and better had

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[15] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 320.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 321.

> it been for you to have been *Papists*, or *Pagans*, than . . . profligate professors of genuine Christianity.[17]

Priestley's elevation of right conduct above right belief did not render the latter irrelevant, since to demonstrate the superior moral tendency of rational Christianity, when compared with other theologies and non-Christian religions, was, as shall be shown,[18] an important weapon in his apologetic arsenal; but the fact remains that for him speculative concerns were always subordinate to practical ones. The ultimate purpose of the apologetic enterprise was moral: to produce "a life and conversation becoming the purity of the gospel."[19]

Moreover, the virtuous life was also the way to happiness. Priestley shared with most of his contemporaries the belief that a benevolent God had so ordered the universe that to obey his commands was to ensure one's wellbeing, both in this world and the next. The great John Tillotson, contemporary of Locke and Newton, and Archbishop of Canterbury at the close of the preceding century, had made the idea popular through his sermons,[20] and his contemporary, Archbishop of York John Sharp, had supported the idea with a sermon of his own entitled *The Profitableness of Godliness: or the Advantage of Piety*

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[17] *Discourses on Various Subjects*, XV, 3-9 *passim*.

[18] *Infra*, pp. 86-96.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[20] See especially "Of Doing Good" and "Of the Great Duties of Natural Religion," *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson*, (8 vols.; London: Printed for James, John and Paul Knapton, 1735), II, 295 ff. and 593 ff.

for the Promoting all a Man's Interest in this World.[21] Priestley's principal authority, David Hartley, whose *Observations on Man*,[22] he considered to be "the most valuable production of the mind of man,"[23] had asserted that "a strict regard to the precepts of benevolence, piety, and the moral sense, favors even gross self-interest."[24]

All this meant that, for Priestley, the final end of the apologetic task was not only the increase of human virtue but also of human happiness, since the two were so closely related. In fact, Priestley could go so far as to define virtue as "that disposition of mind, and that course of conduct arising from it, which is best calculated to promote a man's own happiness and the happiness of others with whom he is connected."[25]

This belief in the coincidence of divine will and worldly wellbeing meant, for Priestley, that the apologist dealt with the most immediate practical matters of existence. The right knowledge of God is, he asserted in the second paragraph of the *Institutes*, "the most important of any that we can give our attention to; because it is the most nearly connected with our present and future happiness."[26]

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[21] John Sharp, *Fifteen Sermons Preached on Several Occasions* (London: Kettilby, 1700), pp. 48 ff.

[22] David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* [London, 1749] (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966).

[23] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 257.

[24] Hartley, *op. cit.*, p. 496.

[25] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 359.

[26] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 1.

Priestley not only insisted upon the primary importance of the apologetic task in his writing, he also lived it. With the exception of the seven years (1773-1780) he spent as librarian to Lord Shelburne, he was throughout his adult life in England a pastor and teacher at various Dissenting churches and schools. In every church he sought to establish catechetical classes. We have already seen his resoluteness in the face of the Parisian skeptics, and we gather from a letter to Theophilus Lindsey describing his passage to America that he spent much of his time on shipboard supplying the "want of information" concerning rational Christianity manifested by the unbelievers in the company.[27]

To posterity he is remembered primarily as a scientist, the discoverer of oxygen and other gasses, but Priestley himself was never in doubt as to the main object of his labors. In the preface to Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air[28] he acknowledges that "having been a pretty successful adventurer" in scientific pursuits, his colleagues in the field wondered that he had not confined himself to them. His answer is that, in the first place, since he has engaged in such a great variety of activities, he is in a better position to judge than those whose interests are more limited which are the more important, and that, secondly, his theological efforts, about which they are particularly concerned, do not take up so much of his time as they might imagine--usually only the mornings and evenings. But his "principal defense" rests on the "superior dignity and importance of theological studies to any other whatever" since they alone deal with man's eternal destiny. In his *Memoirs* he declares that the greatest satisfaction he has received from his scientific fame has arisen "from the weight it may give to my attempts to defend Christianity."[29]

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[27] Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Life and Correspondence, 1787-1804, I, Part II, 244-45.

[28] Dedication and Preface to Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air, and Other Branches of Natural Philosophy Connected with the Subject. In Three Volumes, Being the Former Six Abridged and Methodized, with Many Additions [1790], XXV, 371-84.

His apologetic concern remained to the very end of his life. Only a few months before his death, in a letter to a young Philadelphia pastor, John Blair Linn, who had engaged him in public controversy, Priestley contended that he had probably written more to demonstrate the truth and importance of Christianity than any man living and that "few men living, perhaps none, have had more opportunity of knowing *Unbelievers* of all kinds than myself, or given more attention to their principles.[30]

His last work, *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy, Compared With Those of Revelation*,[31] was apologetic in purpose, and in the preface, dictated to his son a few days before his death,[32] he expressed his gratitude to Divine Providence for allowing him

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[29] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 200.

[30] *A Second Letter to the Rev. John Blair Linn, D.D. in Reply to His Defence of the Doctrines of the Divinity of Christ and Atonement* [1803], XXI, 223.

[31] *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy, Compared with Those of Revelation* [1804], XVII, 367-519.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

> To do so much as I have done towards illustrating and defending the evidences of revelation . . . I could not have closed my life with more satisfaction than after a work of this kind. May the great Lord of the harvest send more, more zealous, and more able labourers into his harvest.[33]

It may well be that Priestley's Lord has seen more able defenders of the gospel, but few, if any, have been more zealous.

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[33] *Ibid.*.

CHAPTER II

TWOFOLD PROGRAM OF THE APOLOGETIC

Priestley's apologetic program was twofold. On the one hand, he felt it was necessary to purge Christianity of those "corruptions" which made it unacceptable to thoughtful unbelievers, and, on the other hand, evidences must be provided for those tenets which were deemed to be essential. This twofold aim found expression in one of Priestley's earliest writings, Address on the Lord's Supper, in which he argued that any effective defense of Christian principles must be preceded by a clearing away of false accretions:

> Before we attempt the vindication of anything, let us first consider, whether we have any occasion to vindicate it at all; that is, whether it really belongs to our religion; or whether it have only been generally supposed to belong to it; for some of our defenders of Christianity, in consequence of attempting too much, appear to me to have done nothing. It will be in vain to offer any vindication of our religion, till it be cleared of such encumbrances as would render any scheme indefensible.[1]

This twofold conception does not, of course, make Priestley unique in the history of apologetics, since the internally directed effort to remove corruptions and the externally directed one to provide evidences generally characterize the theologian concerned for those outside the theological circle. Similar programs in England can be traced back at least as far as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, whose

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[1] A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, on the Subject of the Lord's Supper, XXI, 251-52.

De Veritate appeared in 1624. John Locke's highly influential treatise, The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695) employed the same approach, and Priestley himself saw his work as only the continuation of the reformation begun, but not completed, in the sixteenth century.

Those earlier leaders who sought to cleanse the church of the abuses and superstitions of "Popery" are to be emulated, not in the sense that the systems which they developed are to remain unchanged, for they were not, and could not be, aware of every abuse, but in the sense that their struggle to re-establish genuine Christianity is to be continued. Those who in the name of loyalty to sixteenth century formulas now oppose such a continuing reformation

> are no more to us than the heads of the church, immediately before the Reformation, were to the first reformers. They acquiesce in a system handed down from their ancestors; we think we can improve upon that system: and there is no argument which they can allege against our attempts to improve upon it, but what hath been long ago urged against the similar attempts of those very persons on whose authority they themselves build their faith; persons with whom those arguments had no manner of weight, and whom, for that very reason, they as Protestants profess to applaud.[2]

Therefore, let those who wish to be truly faithful to the Reformation heritage join in the task of clearing away

> whatever . . . we may perceive . . . of the errors and superstitions of Popery, and deviates from the genuine simplicity of the gospel . . . Like them [i.e. the first Reformers], let us show that we also can think for ourselves; and with the same freedom and zeal for the common cause, let us endeavor to enlighten the minds of others.[3]

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[2] Ibid., p. 250.

[3] Ibid., pp. 250-51.

A twofold apologetic meant a twofold opposition. From America Priestley wrote to a friend at Hackney that although he was "set for the defense of the gospel" against the rising tide of infidelity in this new land, his task was made more difficult by those clergymen who "can bawl out against me as a heretic loud enough, but . . . have nothing to say to the common enemy, so that I have to look two ways at the same time."[4] However, looking "two ways at the same time" was nothing new for him. Throughout his career he found it necessary to justify his work of theological purgation to the more orthodox while simultaneously proving the validity of what remained to unbelievers.

On the more orthodox "right" were ranged Roman Catholicism, the Church of England, Methodism, and all except the most liberal Dissenters. On the infidel "left" were the Deists, skeptics, and followers of non-Christian religions, particularly the Jews. Priestley engaged in controversy with representatives of them all.

1. Opponents on the Orthodox Right

His principal Catholic opponent was Alexander Geddes, one of England's leading biblical scholars, with whom he debated the divinity of Christ.[5] The most famous theological battle of his life, one which raged in print for eight years (1783-1790), was with Samuel Horsley, archdeacon and later bishop in the Church of

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[4] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Life and Correspondence 1787-1804*, I, Part II, 372.

[5] *Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1787* [1788], XVIII, 428-45.

England, who, like Geddes, defended traditional Christology against the arch Unitarian.[6] In the debate over an established church and the proper extent of religious liberty, Priestley engaged such distinguished figures as Blackstone, Burke, and Pitt.[7]

One of Priestley's most popular writings, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity*,[8] which urged the use of reason in religious matters and attacked such "corrupt" doctrines as predestination, original sin, and Christ's divinity, was written to counteract the growing popularity of Methodism among the Dissenters at Leeds which occurred while Priestley was pastor of the Mill Hill Chapel there.[9]

But many of Priestley's sharpest criticisms were aimed at his more conservative fellow Dissenters. It is true that he never lost a certain admiration for the consistent and awe-inspiring system of doctrine which he called "old Calvinism."[10]

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[6] See *infra*, p. 204.

[7] *Remarks on Some Paragraphs in the Fourth Volume of Dr. Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, Relating to the Dissenters* [1769], XXII, 302-28; *A Letter to the Right Hon. William Pitt, First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the Subjects of Toleration and Church Establishments; Occasioned by His Speech Against the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, on Wednesday, the 28th of March, 1787* [1787], XIX, 111-34; *Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France, etc.* [1791], XXII, 145-244.

[8] *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity*, II, 383-404, 404-16.

[9] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 74.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 11. This attitude was doubtless, in part, owing to the influence of his aunt and childhood guardian, Mrs. Keighley. See *supra*, pp. 10-11.

"The genuine Supralapsarian system" with its belief in the

> eternally-destined fall of man, an infinite penalty incurred by one, and . . . affecting all, and an infinite atonement adequate to it, made by an infinite Being; by which means a small remnant of the human race are necessarily saved, while all the rest of mankind . . . are consigned to everlasting torment . . . from which results glory to a God, who . . . sought nothing else

is, he confessed, a "tremendous doctrine which has overawed mankind for so many centuries" that, when "all the modern qualified, intermediate systems [i.e. Arminianism, Baxterianism, Arianism]" are compared to it, they appear as "crude, incoherent, and contemptible things."[11] Furthermore, the attempts by more moderate Calvinists to make this impressive, but dreadful, scheme palatable to the current age by altering an article or two are in vain because "every part is necessary to the whole; and if one stone be pushed out of its place, the whole building tumbles to the ground."[12] The only valid alternative, he felt, was to forsake Calvinism altogether and carry out a thoroughgoing theological revision.

2. Opponents on the Infidel Left

This revision, as has been indicated, was to consist essentially of a reduction of Christian principles to those essentials whose truth could be demonstrated to the doubters and outright enemies of the faith arrayed on what we have called Priestley's "left."

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[11] A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture, II, 487.

[12] Ibid.

Nearest to him theologically were the Deists, or, more accurately, their numerous, but much less aggressive successors, since by Priestley's time Deism in England was no longer a militant movement but remained as a silently pervasive attitude among many of the educated.[13] Although he shared their desire for a rational religion purged of paradox and mystery and, therefore, manifested the same critical attitude toward much of traditional Christianity, Priestley separated himself sharply from the Deists on the issues of special revelation and miracle. Unlike them, he insisted both on their necessity--over and above the general revelation contained in the "religion of nature"--and their actuality, particularly with regard to our knowledge of a life after death.

> Some will say that as Deism leads to Atheism, Socinianism leads to Deism; and it cannot be denied that there are many instances of this transition . . . from a disposition to throw off the yoke of authority, or from a love of truth and a spirit of inquiry, not accompanied with an equal love of virtue, or a serious attention to a future state . . . But where freedom of thinking is joined to real piety, and a sense of the value of revelation, as that which alone can give us any assurance of a future state, the difference between Socinianism and Deism . . . will appear to be infinitely greater . . . than any of the differences of opinion preceding it [i.e. the degrees of Christian belief more conservative than Socinianism].[14]

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[13] For an account of the "rise and fall" of Deism in England see R. L. Stromberg, Religious Liberalism in England (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1954), especially pp. 52-69.

[14] Observations on the Increase of Infidelity to which are added, Animadversions on the Writings of Several Modern Unbelievers, and Especially the Ruins of Mr. Volney [1797], XVII, 99.

When Tom Paine revived the old deistic themes at the end of the century in his *Age of Reason* (1794), Priestley did not hesitate to reply to "his virulent attack upon revelation."[15]

Posing a far more serious threat than the deistic religion of nature to the kind of rational supernaturalism which Priestley sought to establish was the radical skepticism embodied in the writings of David Hume and implied in the historical interpretations of Edward Gibbon.

His opinion of Hume was not very high. Although willing to admit the excellence of his literary style, with regard to the "metaphysical writings" his feeling was that "on the whole, the world is very little the wiser for them . . . Compared with Dr. Hartley, I consider Mr. Hume as not even a child."[16] Nevertheless, he admitted that the skillfully contrived *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) would promote the cause of atheism among those already inclining in that direction,[17] and in ways we shall discuss later,[18] he sought to refute the arguments against natural theology and miracle found in An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding.[19]

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[15] *A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France, on the Subject of Religion; and of the Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever in Answer to Mr. Paine's Age of Reason* [1794], XXI, 128.

[16] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 367-68.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 368.

[18] *Infra*, pp. 131-164.

Priestley took Gibbon far more seriously, and although his repeated attempts to draw Gibbon into a public debate were unsuccessful, after Gibbon's death Priestley wrote that he felt Gibbon "better qualified to discuss the evidences of Christianity than any other unbeliever . . . and his plan of attack . . . the fairest of any."[20] Part of "The General Conclusion" to An History of the Corruptions of Christianity was devoted to refuting Gibbon's contention that the rise of the early church could be accounted for without reference to supernatural intervention,[21] and supplementary arguments on the same theme were set forth in Part II of Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever.[22]

In some respects Judaism, at least as Priestley saw it, was quite close to his own position. Together they shared a belief in the one God, in miracles, in the divine authority of the Old Testament, in the fulfillment of prophecy, and in the simple humanity of Jesus. He was quite willing to concede that the Jews were a chosen people, the "elder branch of the family," who would continue to play a special role in the history of salvation until the end of the world.[23] What separated Jews from Christians, what, in fact, prevented the former from being restored to the Holy Land, was their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, and it was Priestley's hope that a rational presentation of the evidences for Christ's divine mission would convince them.[24] In pursuit of this hope he exchanged a series of letters with David Levi, a London hatmaker and Hebrew scholar, who did not help matters any by refusing, first of all, to admit that Priestley was a Christian.[25]

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[19] First published as Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding [London, 1748].

[20] Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion [1794], XV, 197.

[21] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity [1782], V, 482-94.

[22] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II [1787], IV, 444-548.

A more detailed discussion of the theological positions developed by Priestley in the course of this twofold apologetic enterprise will be forthcoming, but such a preliminary survey of some of Priestley's leading opponents on the theological right and left indicates the variety of his antagonists. It is not surprising that the depth of his arguments was not always proportionate to their breadth.

3. *Causes for the Rise of Infidelity*

The need for the defense of the gospel was made more acute by the upsurge of "infidelity" which Priestley believed was connected with the French Revolution. He sympathized with the political aims and achievements of the Revolution, especially the disestablishment of the church, and was convinced that it, along with the American Revolution, heralded the establishment of "a totally new, a most wonderful and important era in the history of mankind" which would see the establishment of civil and religious liberty, an end to war and corrupt government, and the universal prevalence of religious truth.[26] He could also speak of it in even more apocalyptic terms as the first step in the destruction of anti-Christ which would prepare the way for the Second Coming.[27]

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[23] *Letters to the Jews*, XX, 229.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 228-31.

[25] *Letters to Dr. Priestley* (London, 1787), p. 9. Priestley answered these letters in *Letters to the Jews, Part II* [1787], XX, 251-74. Levi made a reply, *Letters to Dr. Priestley, in Answer to his Letters to the Jews, Part II* (London, 1789).

On the other hand, he also saw that an immediate consequence of the Revolution was an increase in the number and boldness of unbelievers. Largely to blame for this was, he felt, the long and oppressive establishment of Roman Catholicism whose corrupt and superstitious version of Christianity had left educated Frenchmen no alternative but atheism. A civil establishment of a religion based on such doctrines as the Trinity and transubstantiation

> is, without doubt, [that] . . . at which the common sense of mankind will ever revolt, [and] that makes so many unbelievers . . . These systems, and the blindness and obstinacy in the governing powers, in rejecting every proposal of reforming the most palpable abuses, and the most manifest oppressions, make unbelievers much faster than all rational Christians can unmake them.[28]

The open rejection of all revealed religion by many distinguished persons as a result of the Revolution challenged the friends of genuine Christianity

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[26] Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France, XXII, 236-44.

[27] For a typical statement see The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies [1794], XV, 532-52.

[28] Ibid., p. 546.

> to show that they are not chargeable with a blind, implicit faith, believing what their fathers, mothers, or nurses, believed before them, merely because they believed it; but that their faith is the offspring of reason: that Christianity is no cunningly devised fable, but that the evidence of the facts on which it is built, is the same with that of any other facts of ancient date.[29]

In fact, the rise of infidelity, while a challenge, was also a blessing because the acids of doubt would, in the long run, purge the true faith of the encrusted and repellent superstitions which prevented its universal acceptance.

> Whatever will not bear the test of the most rigorous scrutiny, must now be rejected; the great superstition and imposture, viz. human authority, power and emolument, being now, in a great measure, withdrawn. This will be the means of purging our religion from everything that will not bear this rigorous examination; but it will contribute to everything that *will* bear it. And what can we wish for more?[30]

Thus, in accordance with providential intention, infidelity was removing one of its own causes.

Of course corrupt versions of Christianity and the revolt against them inspired by the French Revolution were not the only reasons for unbelief. In *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*[31] Priestley suggested a number of other causes. One was the tendency of most people to accept without examination the opinions of prominent men, and in an age which boasted of Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, and Franklin, who could wonder at skepticism's popularity.[32] Another was the increasingly exclusive concentration of men on the immediate pleasure and problems of this world, an attitude which meant an indifference to anything which pointed to a meaning beyond this present life.[33] Refusal to read the Scriptures was another factor, since but to examine them impartially would make it "impossible but that . . . minds must be impressed with a persuasion of their truth."[34] Those who read them and studied the evidences for true Christianity, yet still resisted, could only be motivated by hatred for its moral challenge to their profligacy or by an emotional maladjustment.[35] Finally, the attempt to base religion exclusively upon the testimony of nature had undermined religion itself since, without the clear testimony of special revelation, the defense of religion must rely upon what is at best ambiguous evidence and complex arguments.[36]

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[29] *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, XV, 195.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

[31] *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, XVII, 1-128.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

But all these sources of unbelief were subordinate to or derivative from the principle one--the corruptions and abuses of Christianity which obscured its true nature--and it was to the task of discovering and defending that essential nature that Priestley devoted himself.

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[33] Ibid., pp. 16-27.

[34] Ibid., pp. 28-32.

[35] Ibid., pp. 32-36.

[36] Ibid., pp. 89-93; infra, pp. 71-80.

PART II

THE MEANS FOR DISCOVERING AND DEFENDING TRUE CHRISTIANITY

The title of a tract in which Priestley sought to summarize the Unitarian position, *A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God . . . from Reason, from the Scriptures, and from History*, proclaims the three sources upon which he depended for discovering and defending true Christianity.[1] That these sources--reason, Scripture, and history--were basic is further indicated by the format of his first attempt at an extensive systematic statement of his theological views, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*.[2] He divides the book into three parts: the first devoted to showing "how far unassisted reason has been able to carry us in our inquiries concerning the being, perfections and providence of God, and . . . the duty, and final expectations of mankind";[3] the second to describing the evidence for special revelation derived from the study of history;[4] the third "to exhibit . . . all the general knowledge that can . . . be collected from [those] books which are usually, and very deservedly, termed *sacred* [i.e. the Old and New Testaments]."[5] What was originally intended as a fourth part of the *Institutes*, designed to supplement the historical evidence for true Christianity offered in Part II with an historical investigation of the means of its corruption, became Priestley's most famous work, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*.[6]

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[1] *A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God; and Against the Divinity and Pre-Existence of Christ, from Reason, from the Scriptures, and from History* [1783], XVIII, 513-19, 527-35. This echoes Richard Hooker's appeal to the authority of Scripture, reason, and tradition in his classic defense of the Anglican Settlement, *Ecclesiastical Polity* (London, 1594 and 1597), but Priestley does not acknowledge any precedents.

[2] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, xv-xxi, 1-380.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

In this part of our essay we shall attempt to make clear what Priestley meant by reason, Scripture, and history, and, in the course of this effort at definition, we shall point out how he used each of these sources to refute the attacks of infidelity. In the succeeding part we shall show how he used this threefold authority to distinguish what he considered to be pure Christianity from some of its principal corruptions.

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[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 111-13.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 259.

[6] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V; see p. 8 for an account of his decision to publish the work in an independent and expanded version.

CHAPTER I

REASON

1. Epistemology

When Priestley referred to "arguments from reason" he sometimes meant *a priori* arguments deduced from logically self-evident principles; at other times arguments arrived at *a posteriori*, that is, based on empirical investigation. The former could assist one to perform the negative task of exposing theological corruptions by, for example, demonstrating the illogicality of the doctrine of the Trinity,[1] but it was *a posteriori* arguments which, he felt, provided the only positive evidence for religious truth.[2]

His mistrust of *a priori* reasoning as a means of establishing specific doctrines sprang ultimately from his empirical epistemology, a fact revealed clearly in his criticism of the attempts by the Scottish Common Sense School, Descartes, and Samuel Clarke to prove the existence of God from instinct or innate ideas.[3]

The data of the external world conveyed to the mind by the senses provide us with all our knowledge.

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[1] See *infra*, pp. 194-97.

[2] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 252-53.

[3] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 391-97.

> We come into the world furnished with proper senses to receive the various impressions to which we are exposed; and the traces in the mind, left by those impressions, appear to be the elements of all the ideas, and all the knowledge we ever acquire.[4]

Therefore, it is entirely superfluous and inconsistent with the efficiency characteristic of nature to maintain that "the same things [are] impressed upon us in another, and quite different manner."[5]

Besides, if the idea of God is innate in all men, how does one account for the infinite variations, perversions, and, particularly, complete absence of the idea in so many times and places? The assertion of instinctive religious knowledge is simply irreconcilable with the reality of atheism.[6]

Priestley was particularly critical of Reid, Oswald, and Beattie, the trio of Scots who spoke for the so-called "Common Sense" philosophical school. In his *Memoirs* he acknowledged that his sharply worded attack, commonly referred to as *An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy*,[7] was "written in a manner I do not wholly approve," but he still expressed the hope that it had, "upon the whole, been of service to the cause of free inquiry and truth."[8]

The appeal to the authority of common sense, understood as instinctive belief, was, he felt, especially in religious matters, both mistaken and dangerous. He fully shared the school's desire to refute Humean skepticism, but he was convinced that it was only furthering it by surrendering the simple theory of the mind advanced by Locke and Hartley, and "substituting such a number of _independent_, _arbitrary_, _instinctive_ principles, that the very enumeration of them is really tiresome."[9] To combat this unnecessary complexity he set forth a brief statement of his own epistemology in which he attempted to show that all our so-called instinctive beliefs are, in fact, derived from experience by the single means of the association of ideas.[10] He also republished separately the portions of Hartley's _Observations on Man_ pertaining to the association of ideas under the title _Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind_[11] as "the most effectual method to divert the attention of the more sensible part of the public from such an incoherent scheme as that of Dr. Reid."[12]

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 391-92.

[7] *An Examination of Dr. Reid's Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense; Dr. Beattie's Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth; and Dr. Oswald's Appeal to Common Sense in Behalf of Religion* [1774], III, 1-166.

[8] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 202.

Priestley was willing to concede that there are self-evident truths--"certain _axioms_ and _postulata_, which must be admitted without proof, in order to the demonstration of everything else"--but the Scottish philosophy went on to make the unwarranted claim that "particular positions," such as the existence of an external world or a Supreme Deity, were such self-evident axioms.[13] This appeal to instinct as the basis for particular philosophical and theological doctrines was a call to irrationalism and, ultimately, to bigotry and persecution.

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[9] _An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy_, III, 27.

[10] _Ibid._, pp. 15-24.

[11] _Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, with Introductory Essays on the Principle of the Association of Ideas_ [1775], III, 167-96. See _infra_, pp. 221 ff.

[12] _An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy_, III, 6.

> This may appear to some to be, after all, a business of *metaphysics* only, and a refinement of no real importance to mankind; but it is a mistake that has really very serious and alarming consequences; for instead of leading to humility, caution and patience in the investigation of truth, it necessarily inspires conceit, and leads to great arrogance and insolence with respect to our opponents in controversy, as persons . . . destitute of common sense, and therefore not to be argued with, but . . . treated as idiots or madmen.[14]

Such an attitude can do no good for the cause of religion since it encourages the unbeliever to appeal to his own instincts as grounds for rejecting those true doctrines which, at a first and superficial glance, may appear absurd.[15] More seriously, by denying the validity of a rational defense of religion it foregoes the possibility of facing "the enemy on his own ground, opposing argument to argument, and silencing sophistry by rational discussion."[16] An effective apologetic becomes impossible.

Priestley also took issue with Samuel Clarke's attempt to demonstrate the existence of God *a priori*, an attempt which he linked with that of "Descartes and others, who maintain that we can prove the existence of a self-existent being from the very idea we have of it."[17]

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[13] *Ibid*., p. 70.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 69.

Clarke had argued that it is logically self-evident that there is an original Being (God) who is the cause of all things, and that to assert the contrary is a contradiction of the same kind as saying two plus two does not equal four.[18] Priestley replied that the existence of such an "original Cause" is not a matter of logic because the opposite statement--the universe exists without a cause--is not a priori contradictory, that is, an affirmation of a mutually exclusive idea, but a matter whose truth or falsehood is to be determined by observation.[19] Clarke had also argued that the idea of this original Being is so basic to all thinking that it cannot be excluded from the mind.[20] Priestley simply observed that "with respect to myself, I have no scruple to say, that I find no difficulty at all in excluding the ideas of everything in nature, except those of space and duration,"[21] and such concepts as these do not necessitate belief in a Deity. Clarke's attempt to extend this a priori method to the proof of divine goodness was likewise rejected on empirical grounds.

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[17] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, IV, 395.

[18] Samuel Clarke, A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation [London, 1704-1705] (8th ed.; London: W. Botham, 1732), p. 17.

[19] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, IV, 392-93.

[20] Clarke, op. cit., p. 17.

[21] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, IV, 393.

> Nothing can prove actual benevolence, in preference to malevolence in the divine nature , but the actual production of happiness, in preference to misery . . . in what is actually produced.[22]

One might think that such a thoroughgoing empiricist would have felt profoundly threatened by the epistemological theories of Berkeley and Hume, but apparently Priestley did not. Berkeley's claim--that because we do not perceive anything other than our own sensations and ideas, these must be impressed upon each of us by "the immediate agency of the Author of our being . . . without the medium of anything external" in order to account for their uniformity--is not impossible. On the other hand, it is much simpler to account for the uniform impressions persons have of the same phenomena by assuming the reality of external objects "by means of which, and a more general agency of the Deity than Bishop Berkeley supposes, all our minds are necessarily impressed in this corresponding manner."[23] This view is also more consistent with the analogy of nature in which we see particular phenomena arise from general laws, rather than from direct divine agency. Both views are only hypotheses, but, since the latter is more probable, "a person must have very little knowledge of the nature of philosophy, who should think of having recourse to any other."[24]

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[22] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, IV, 395.

[23] An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy, III, 23.

[24] Ibid.

As for Hume, Priestley felt it necessary to refute repeatedly and extensively his attack on miracle,[25] but he could "hardly think that we are indebted to him for the least real advance in the knowledge of the human mind."[26] Apparently he never read the *Treatise*, and he dismissed the epistemological skepticism of the *Inquiry* as frivolous. That there is an external reality regulated by general laws, such as those of cause and effect, is "*the easiest hypothesis for acknowledged facts*"; Hume's observation that "all sensible qualities (and, therefore, extension itself,) are in the mind, and not without us, is trifling"; the whole business "does not amount to so much as a *sceptical solution of a sceptical doubt.* It may rather be called the *sceptical proposal of a sceptical doubt.*"[27]

Priestley did not claim that Lockean empiricism with its belief in an external world governed by general laws was an absolute certainty, but since it offered the simplest complete explanation for our experience of knowing, he felt completely safe in assuming its truth.

> The thing that seems chiefly to have influenced the writers above-mentioned to desert the plain doctrine of Mr. Locke, concerning the source of our ideas, is its insufficiency to demonstrate the reality of a *material* world; and, I readily acknowledge, it is insufficient for such a demonstration as shall leave no room for cavil . . . On the other hand, I . . . think . . . that it is more natural to suppose, that there really are . . . bodies . . . placed at certain distances from

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[25] See *infra*, pp. 131-64.

[26] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 367.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

> us . . . by means of which . . . all our minds are necessarily impressed in . . . [a] corresponding manner.[28]

Upon this confidence in the findings of the empirical method Priestley proceeded to erect the *a posteriori* arguments for true Christianity. These were of two kinds--those derived from the observation of nature and those derived from historical investigation. He looked upon the latter as a separate source for religious truth which, in his threefold scheme, he placed beside reason and Scripture. Thus, when appealing to "reason," he usually meant the *a posteriori* arguments from nature,[29] although, as we indicated, he also included in this category *a priori* logical objections, which could serve negatively to expose absurdities. First, we shall discuss his attitude toward these arguments from nature, and then turn our attention to his use of Scripture and history.

2. *Natural Theology*

In his cautious treatment of the natural evidences for Christianity, Priestley reflected the qualifying impact made upon such arguments by Bishop Butler and Hume. Butler, in his *Analogy of Religion*,[30] had sought to undercut the Deists' attack on special revelation in the name of the simple and universal "religion of

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[28] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 253-54.

[29] For example, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, Part I, which he describes as containing the truths attainable by "unaided reason," but which is devoted entirely to the evidences provided by nature, II, 1-64.

[30] Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* [London, 1736] (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961).

Nature" by pointing out that there are just as many difficulties in deriving theological assertions from the course of nature as there are in accepting revelation. Moreover, the difficulties in one correspond to the difficulties in the other. Therefore, if the Deists could maintain that nature proclaimed its Divine Author in spite of these problems, there was no reason why they could not believe special revelation to have the same Divine Source, since the problems were no greater and of the same kind.

As an answer to Deism this line of reasoning was effective, but it was a negative kind of argument at best, dwelling as it did upon analogous complexities and uncertainties, and it raised the fundamental question, explored more fully by Hume, namely, whether nature actually does provide sufficient evidence for a Divine Author.

At times Priestley could speak in thoroughly Butlerian fashion.

> For my part, I cannot help considering the difficulties that attend the proof of the Jewish and Christian revelations, as not greater than those which relate to the doctrines of natural religion.
>
> Whenever, therefore, I shall hear of the conversion of a speculative atheist to serious deism (an event which has never yet come to my knowledge) I shall have little doubt of his soon becoming a serious Christian.[31]

He could also use arguments similar to Butler's to substantiate the truths of revelation by natural analogies. For example, although he was later to move toward a universalist soteriology,[32] at an earlier period he adopted Butler's suggestion in the Analogy[33] that the failure of "the greater part of natural productions to . . . arrive at their proper maturity, but [to] perish long before they have attained it" corresponds to the teaching of revelation that "the bulk of mankind, who never attain to any high degrees of wisdom or virtue, should finally perish also . . . as unworthy . . . while the few who are wise and virtuous, like full ripe fruits, are reserved for future use."[34]

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[31] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I, IV, 322.

[32] See infra, pp. 174-75.

[33] Butler, op. cit., p. 87.

Priestley then was not afraid to use natural theology, believing that it could indicate the existence and attributes of God and the moral obligations of man;[35] however, his claims for it were always carefully qualified.

In the first place, although it might be theoretically possible for men to derive such doctrines from nature without the assistance of revelation, a study of history would reveal that they never had.

> It must be observed, that, in giving a delineation of natural religion, I shall deliver what I suppose _might_ have been known concerning God, our duty, and our future expectations by the light of nature, and not what _was actually_ known of them by any of the human race; for these are very different things.[36]
>
> For though it be true that all the deductions we have made [in Part I of the _Institutes_] are derived from the considerations of nothing but what we _feel_ or _see_, yet these conclusions were never, in fact, drawn from those premises, by any of the human race; and it is in vain that we look for so complete a system of morals among the most intelligent of mankind.[37]

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[34] _Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion_, II, 64.

[35] _Ibid_., p. 2.

[36] _Ibid_.

[37] _Ibid_., p. 72.

Secondly, Priestley was willing at times to admit that the light of nature was not clear enough to establish religious truths, even when the observer's gaze had been pointed in the proper direction by revelation.

> We know nothing of God by the light of nature, but through the medium of his works; and these are such as we cannot fully comprehend; both the efficient and final causes being, in many cases, unknown to us.[38]

> These speculations [on the natural evidences], it must be owned, are, in a great measure, random and vague, but they are the best, as it appears to me, that we can form to ourselves by the light of nature.[39]

Another difficulty with natural theology is that it requires such complicated ratiocination.

> It must . . . be acknowledged that the evidences of natural religion are more difficult to understand, requiring more of what is called *metaphysical reasoning*.[40]

Even those intellectually capable of such discernment lack the complete assurance which produces existential commitment.

> It is possible . . . that by much reflection, and frequent observations on the general order of nature and providence, intelligent persons might arrive at the belief that all evil will ultimately produce good. But this will not give them the full satisfaction which all Christians have from believing . . . "that all things *will* work together for good to them that love *him*" . . . It is impossible that the mere contemplation of nature should give men this full confidence, which is the parent of habitual devotion and of the most heroic action.[41]

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[38] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[40] *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, XVII, 93.

[41] *A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France*, XXI, 115-16.

Moreover, the arguments from nature are always indirect ones derived from appearances, so that preconceptions can easily deflect final conclusions in the direction of one's prejudices.

> What nature teaches us with respect to the manner in which we should conduct ourselves in life, is not in words, intelligible to all men, but must be deduced by way of *inference* from appearances, which one man will interpret in one way, and another in a different one, and every man being necessarily biassed by his own prevailing inclination, he will generally conceive that his own favorite pursuit is not forbidden by it; so that most men will live much as they please, and yet all imagine that *they live agreeably to nature*.[42]

Most troublesome of all, the key argument in natural theology--that for the existence of God from the evidences in nature of a Grand Designer--cannot be established definitively. A designing First Cause is certainly the most probable explanation for the phenomena we observe, but it is not a logically necessary one. Those, like Hume in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, who say that human craftsmanship is not demonstrably analogous to the making of a world, or that there is as much reason to suppose that the world has no maker as that God has none, although the odds are against them, can never be proved wrong by the light of nature alone. That is why the Deist so easily moves on to outright infidelity.

> Indeed, there is one difficulty which, from the nature of the subject, must ever be insurmountable to us. We say that every effect must have a cause, every machine a maker . . . We say that this world, and all its parts . . . furnish innumerable instances of this . . . whence we deduce the well-grounded opinion of the necessity of a maker . . . equal to the execution of such a piece of workmanship. But because we cannot give any account of the origin of this Being, the *Atheist* says, we may as well rest where we are, and content ourselves with

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[42] *Ibid*., p. 116.

> saying, that the world had no maker, as that the author of it had none . . .
>
> We acknowledge that both the Deity himself and the manner of his existence are incomprehensible by us . . . [therefore] from the nature of the subject . . . the Atheist may argue too plausibly for the Deist to be able to return a ready and perfectly satisfactory answer.[43]

Finally, a religion resting on natural reason alone lacks sufficient moral incentive. There are two reasons for this. First, it is impossible to prove conclusively from observation of this earthly life alone that sin never pays.[44] Secondly, belief in an immaterial, and, therefore, immortal soul has been undercut by recent scientific investigations which have demonstrated that all mental operations depend solely upon the organization of the body and brain; that is, man's nature is totally material. This means that, so far as the testimony of nature can tell, when a man dies, he ceases to be; there is no natural evidence for his continuing existence after death. Lacking the moral sanctions provided by the doctrines of a future life and a Last Judgment, men become less and less restrained in their conduct; moral duty is forgotten in the pursuit of present enjoyment.[45]

One might assume before having examined Priestley's views on natural theology that a man able to combine a passion for apologetics with a passion for experimental science would have had more confidence in nature's evidential value for religion. The fact is that his scientific work did have religious significance for him, both as a confirmation of revelation's teaching and as a means of cultivating reverential feelings toward the Author of Nature.

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[43] *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, XVII, 93, 95.

[44] *Ibid*., pp. 90-91.

[45] *Ibid*., pp. 91-92. For a discussion of Priestley's materialism see *infra*, pp. 221-34.

> It is the greatest recommendation of these studies [i.e. the natural sciences], that when they are conducted in a proper manner . . . they tend, in an eminent degree, to promote a spirit of piety, by exciting our admiration of the wonderful order of the Divine Works and Divine Providence; marks of consummate wisdom and perfect goodness perpetually intruding themselves upon the mind . . . and inspiring the ingenuous heart with the most profound sentiments of reverence, love, and confidence.[46]

But notice that it is only when such research is carried on "in the proper manner" by the "ingenuous heart" that it yields such results. When an antagonist charged that Priestley would never have become a believer if he had begun his experiments before he became a minister, Priestley admitted, "it is a thing that cannot be known, except to my Maker,"[47] thereby missing a golden opportunity to have asserted, if he had believed it, that the study of nature leads directly to faith.

Priestley's view was that the findings of natural science did indeed corroborate religious belief, but they were not sufficient of themselves to produce it. They suffered from the same limitations intrinsic to all natural theology--limitations we have attempted to outline above.

In particular, no experiment could produce evidence for a life after death.

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[46] Miscellaneous Observations Relating to Education [1778], XXV, 18.

[47] Additional Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever [1782], IV, 442-43.

> All that any philosophical person [i.e., one engaged in the study of natural science] can pretend to say in the case must be, that the expectation of a future life is so manifestly chimerical, that it can never be worth a wise man's while to lose a moment in thinking about it . . . Natural phenomena, I agree with them, are unfavorable to any expectation of a future life.[48]

And yet, if it is true, as revelation declares, that there is such a future life and that earthly existence is only a preparation for it, then "studies but remotely connected with that great object, must have a dignity and importance infinitely superior to any other."[49]

He who would prefer any other kind of study to those which deal with this infinite prospect is "like a man busying himself about farthings, who has large estates or kingdoms depending, and who should neglect the latter in order to secure the former."[50]

The truly Christian scientist finds his researches confirm his faith. "In all the works of nature he rejoices in the God of nature."[51] He also finds that his faith, resting on the assurance of a future state, gives "a double relish to philosophical [i.e. scientific] pursuits, and thereby contributes to their success," because the demoralizing threat of total extinction, "leaving us uncertain whether even the world itself, and the whole race of man . . . may not be doomed to destruction," is removed.[52]

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[48] Dedication and Preface to Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air, XXV, 380.

[49] Ibid., p. 379.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Forms of Prayer and Other Offices, for the Use of Unitarian Societies, XXI, 543.

[52] Preface to The Doctrine of Phlogiston established, and that of the Composition of Water refuted [1800], I, Part II, 479.

But in the case of those who do not carry on their work in the context of faith

> we see, in fact, that natural knowledge, instead of elevating, too often debases the mind, and supplies food for the lowest and most malignant passions. Men of science . . . too often are, envious, malicious, avaricious, and . . . sometimes the grossest sensualists.[53]

Therefore, because of natural theology's numerous and serious limitations, Priestley felt that religious truth must come primarily from special revelation. The arguments from nature could play a useful corroborative role, but they must be clarified, supplemented, and reinforced by direct communications from nature's Author.[54]

This position finds striking expression when Priestley, after an attempt to defend natural theology against the objections raised in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, concludes by accepting seriously the skeptic's ironic commendation of revelation.

> Notwithstanding I have differed so much from Mr. Hume with respect to the principles of his treatise, we shall, in words, at least, agree in our conclusion. For though I think the being of a God, and his general benevolence and providence, to be sufficiently demonstrable, yet so many cavils may be started on the subject, and so much still remains that a rational

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[53] Forms of Prayer and Other Offices, XXI, 543.

[54] Priestley's ambivalent attitude ~~toward~~ natural theology resembles John Calvin's (cf. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960 (made from the Latin edition published in 1559: Geneva)], Book I, chaps. 1-5, pp. 33-69), although Priestley never refers to Calvin in this context. They would agree that while a natural theology is possible in theory, it is never actualized. The essential difference between them is that Calvin attributes this failure primarily to man's sinfulness, Priestley to man's intellectual limitations.

> creature must wish to be informed of concerning his maker, his duty here, and his expectations hereafter, that what Mr. Hume said by way of cover and irony, I can say with great seriousness, and I do not wish to say it much otherwise or better.
>
> "The most natural sentiment," he says, "which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes and operations of the divine object of our faith. A person seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason will fly to *revealed truth* with the greatest avidity . . . . To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step toward being a sound believing Christian."[55]

Of course, Priestley's admission of the need for revelation did not mean a surrender of the claim that Christianity was rational and capable of empirical verification. It meant rather that the burden of proof was shifted from the inconclusive evidence provided by nature to the incontrovertible evidence of history. This shift to historical evidence, Sir Leslie Stephen points out,[56] was a strategy typical of British apologists in the latter part of the eighteenth century who found natural theology weakened from within by Butler and pierced to its vitals from without by Hume.

But before turning our attention to Priestley's use of the arguments from history we shall examine his understanding of revelation, and, more specifically, that which he considered to be the bearer of revelation--the Bible.

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[55] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 378. For the quotation from Hume see *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [London, 1779] (Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1947), pp. 227-28.

[56] Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 320.

CHAPTER II

SCRIPTURE

The forces fostering the rationalist approach to religion which were noted in the introduction also affected the eighteenth century's approach to the Bible.[1] Already by the end of the seventeenth century it had become increasingly difficult to look upon it as a sacrosanct book immune from rational inquiry. Hobbes, Spinoza, Peyrère, and Simon had all expressed doubts about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, doubts which implied a serious challenge to the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. Spinoza, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), had argued that the Bible must be treated like any other book, subject to the ordinary rules of historical interpretation. Pierre Bayle, in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), had taken pains to point out numerous inconsistencies, contradictions, and immoralities to be found there. But in England the writers whose approach to Scripture set the style of biblical understanding for those, like Priestley, who sought to reconcile the growing authority of reason with that of special revelation were John Tillotson and John Locke. Since Priestley was an adherent, through Hartley, of the epistemology which Locke set forth in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,[2] and since

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[1] See *supra*, pp. 1-3.

[2] See *supra*, pp. 66, 70.

Locke, in A. C. McGiffert's words, "presents so clearly the controlling principles of the rationalistic movement,"[3] a brief examination of his view of the Bible will serve to place Priestley's mode of scriptural interpretation in perspective.

In the Essay Concerning Human Understanding Locke defines revelation as "any proposition, not . . . made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication."[4] Corresponding to this conception of revelation as propositional truth is Locke's definition of faith as intellectual assent--a persuasion of the mind concerning the truth of such specially communicated propositions.[5] In The Reasonableness of Christianity Locke went on to define his understanding of the Bible as follows:

> A collection of writings, designed by God, for the instruction of the illiterate bulk of mankind, in the way to salvation.[6]

In other words, the Bible contains a set of truths specially revealed by God about the nature of reality and moral obligation which will enable those who accept and conform to them to attain eternal life--Locke's synonym for salvation.[7] But note that such special revelation is for the benefit of the "illiterate bulk" of men who are prevented from attaining these truths through failure to exercise their reason. If, however, reason is capable of arriving at these truths, then why should there be revelation? Locke's answer is that reason had proved unable to restrain men's impulses to idolatry and licentiousness, and only revelation could render the truth sufficiently clear. God delivered this revelation to the Hebrews and later to all the world through Christ in which he made clear "the one invisible true God . . . the precepts of morality . . . [and] the great encouragement . . . to a virtuous and pious life . . . the doctrine of a future state."[8] The internal evidences for the truth of this revelation, and thus for the Bible's authority, are its inherent rationality and moral tendency.[9] The external evidences are miracle and fulfilled prophecy.[10]

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[3] A. C. McGiffert, Protestant Thought Before Kant [London, 1911], (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), p. 200.

[4] John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding [London, 1690], ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (2 vols.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1894), II, 416.

[5] Ibid.

[6] John Locke, The Reasonableness of Christianity [London, 1695], ed. I. T. Ramsey (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 25.

[7] Ibid., p. 32.

Locke specifically rejects any form of allegorical interpretation of the Bible.

> The written Word of God . . . [is] generally, and in necessary points, to be understood in the plain direct meaning of the words and phrases, such as they may be supposed to have had in the mouths of the speakers . . . without such learned, artificial, and forced senses of them, as are sought out, and put upon them, in most of the systems of divinity, according to the notions that each one has been bred up in.[11]

He also calls for interpreting particular texts in the light of the general tenor of Scripture, and warns against exaggerating the importance of particular passages taken out of context. Rather, the reader should seek to discern the basic truths essential to salvation.

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[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-69 *passim*.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-34.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

> We must look into the drift of the discourse, observe the coherence and connexion of the parts, and see how it is consistent with itself, and other parts of Scripture, if we will conceive it right. We must not cull out, as best suits our system, here and there a period or verse, as if they were all distinct and independent aphorisms; and make these the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, and necessary to salvation, unless God has made them so.[12]

Locke understands the essential conditions for salvation to be two--"believing Jesus to be the Messiah, and a good life."[13]

Locke's understanding of the Bible as a book of specially revealed propositional truths; his reduction of its doctrinal content to God, virtue, and a future life; his appeal to internal and external evidences; his stress on the "plain direct meaning" of the words; and his elevation of the general "drift of the discourse" over specific verses, characterized the approach to Scripture typical of the Age of Reason. As we shall see, Priestley, although he was to go farther in his criticism of the Bible than Locke dared to go, and was to shift certain of Locke's emphases, nevertheless, remained a member of the rationalist school of interpretation which Locke helped to found.

To Priestley special revelation also meant propositional truth or, as he would say, "general knowledge" communicated by God directly to men through the Scripture.[14] The definition of revelation as personal encounter between God and man, the disclosure of "not truth concerning God, but the living God Himself"[15] apparently never occurred to him nor to the other rationalist interpreters of Scripture. Revelation was that "additional, . . . fuller, and clearer knowledge" concerning "God, . . . our duty, and . . . our future expectations" contained in the Old and New Testaments.

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[12] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[13] *Ibid*., pp. 44-45.

[14] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 259 ff.

This did not mean, as we shall see, that he believed the Bible to be infallible, but those who sought the religious certainty and clarity which nature could not provide would find assurance in its pages.

> As the Jewish and Christian religions . . . [are] founded on a series of revelations of the will of God to man, the history of which is recorded in the Old and New Testaments, it behoves us to examine these books with care; taking it for granted, that they contain truths of the greatest importance to our happiness.[16]

One of his most spirited defenses of Scripture, written toward the end of his life, and one which provides a glimpse of his deep personal devotion to it, was inspired by Tom Paine's attack in The Age of Reason.

> Mr. Paine, speaking of the Bible in general, says, "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that hath served to corrupt and brutalize mankind . . ."
>
> The probability is, that I am much better acquainted with the Bible than Mr. Paine, and I read it daily in the

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[15] William Temple, quoted by W. M. Horton, "Revelation," A Handbook of Christian Theology, ed. by Marvin Halverson (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1958), p. 327.

[16] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 259.

> original[17] . . . [an] advantage . . . to which Mr. Paine will not pretend. Now I can truly say, that I read it with increasing satisfaction . . . It consists of books relating to the most important of all subjects . . . There are the most unequivocal marks of the most exalted piety and the purest benevolence . . . There are, in my opinion, no writings whatever that are at all comparable to the Scriptures for their moral tendency, in giving just views of the attributes and providence of God, or . . . of man, . . . of his duty in this life, and . . . of another and better state of being, of which it gives him the clearest information and most satisfactory evidence.[18]

1. Internal Evidence

The evidence for the Bible's genuinely revelatory character was, Priestley believed, chiefly historical, or "external," and we shall discuss this kind of confirmation in the next chapter, but there was also "internal" evidence which Priestley, following Locke, believed supported the claim for Scripture's divine authority.[19] He developed this latter type by comparing the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic qualities of Scripture with those displayed by the literature of other philosophies and religions. The obvious and overwhelming superiority of the Bible in each case was proof of its divine source.

This use of "comparative religion" for apologetic purposes, based as it was on the West's as yet very limited knowledge of

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[17] Priestley reports that he knew Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, German, Chaldee, Syriac, and was beginning Arabic, before he entered Daventry Academy at nineteen. *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 7, 8, 14.

[18] *A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France*, XXI, 167-68.

[19] The distinction between "internal" and "external" evidences also goes back to Tillotson. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-97.

Eastern thought and culture, doubtless did less than full justice to non-Christian world views, but it must be remembered that anti-Christian polemicists were using similar "comparative" methods to demonstrate that the Scriptures were morally and intellectually inferior.[20]

Most notable was Voltaire, to whom Priestley made repeated reference in *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, his first attempt to demonstrate that the comparative method worked to Christianity's advantage.[21]

Voltaire had claimed that:

> *La religion des Payens ne consistoit que dans la morale, et dans le fêtes; la morale, qui est commune aux hommes de tous les lieux; et les fêtes, qui n'etoient que de réjoissances, et ne pouvient troubler la genre humain.*[22]

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[20] Carl L. Becker, *op. cit.*, has described the general attitude of those who employed this means of attacking Christianity: "There were, first, the two golden ages of Pericles and Augustus . . . there was [also] the experience of non-Christian peoples in distant lands--in Asia and the two Indies; and from the accounts of sixteenth and seventeenth century travelers it was made clear that far the greater part of mankind, during far the greater period of recorded history, had lived (except, indeed when oppressed and corrupted by Christian powers) more happily and humanely, under laws and customs more free and equitable, and more in accord with natural religion and morality, than the peoples of Europe had done during the centuries of ecclesiastical ascendancy . . . --all this convincing testimony could now happily be turned against the Christian centuries [and Scriptures] to refute and confound them" (pp. 106-08).

[21] *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion* 1796 , XVI, 36, 50, 51, 63, 68, etc.

[22] Quoted *ibid.*, p. 36.

In contrast the religion of the Old Testament was that of

> *Un peuple ignorant et barbare, qui joint depuis long-temps la plus indigne avarice à la plus détestable superstition.*[23]

Priestley replied by dwelling at length upon examples of immorality and ignorance found in the beliefs and practices of ancient "Heathen religion"--polytheism, animism, divination, human sacrifice, and the "lewdness" of fertility rites.[24] These he contrasted to the theology and institutions of the Hebrews--the affirmation of one righteous God, the condemnation of idolatry, the exaltation of moral virtue over ritual, the innocence and dignity of their festivals, the absence of superstitious restrictions (the dietary laws were motivated by a concern for health), the humanity of their political institutions.[25]

But there might be those who would dismiss common pagan practices as the superstitions of the vulgar, and maintain that the more intelligent, although remaining quiet for political reasons, held a more rational system. In answer Priestley surveyed the teachings of the ancient philosophers to show that they too fell far short of biblical wisdom.[26] Both Scripture and nature testify to God's complete control of creation and yet none of the philosophers of antiquity perceived the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Many of them taught that all creation proceeded by a series of emanations from the Divine Substance and that eventually the latter would re-absorb all, a notion subversive to moral effort and degrading to divine transcendence. Many philosophers denied entirely the existence of an intelligent regulating force behind the universe. Many attributed evil to matter or to a separate entity without seeing that evil is part of God's providential order; in fact, the notion of providence was generally absent from non-Christian philosophy.. Even such prestigious thinkers as Socrates, Plato, and Pythagoras believed in inferior divinities who sometimes worked at cross purposes. None of these philosophers taught the resurrection of the body, but obscured the true nature of life after death with such untenable doctrines as pre-existence and the immortality of the soul. For all their vaunted intellectual superiority many of them participated in the rituals of the vulgar, and no later pagan philosopher is recorded as liberal enough to plead for the toleration of Christianity during the first three hundred years of its history. Contrast the secrecy of many of them with the openness of Moses and Jesus. Although many of them had just ideas of moral virtue, they weakened the force of their teaching by conceiving matter, and particularly the body, to be the source of evil. Such views led to excessive austerities which have nothing to do with genuine moral purity.

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[23] *Ibid*., p. 63.

[24] *Ibid*., pp. 36-62.

[25] *Ibid*., pp. 62-89.

[26] *Ibid*., pp. 90-116.

Priestley summarized his findings by observing,

> Had modern unbelievers found in the Scriptures any of the doctrines which I have shown to have been professed by the philosophers of antiquity . . . would they not have exclaimed against such crude notions and wild conceptions . . . ?

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> On the contrary, the tenets of the religion of the Hebrews, which has been so much decried by *Voltaire* and others, were, in the highest degree rational, worthy of the Supreme Being, leading to the greatest purity of heart and life . . . Being, therefore, so much superior to, and the reverse of all the forms of religions with which Moses or any of his countrymen could have been acquainted, and even superior, as I have shown, to the principles advanced by the most celebrated of the Heathen philosophers, there is the greatest antecedent probability that it came from God.[27]

The comparison of religions for apologetic purposes was, of course, not original with Priestley. He himself admitted reliance upon such works as John Leland's *The Advantage and Necessity of the Christian Revelation* (1763), Arthur Young's *An Historical Illustration on Idolatrous Corruptions in Religion* (1734), and Antony Guénée's *Lettres de quelque Juifs . . . à M. de Voltaire* (1769), but the strategy became of increasing interest to him late in his life. He followed up his first treatment of the subject in the *Discourses* delivered at Philadelphia in 1796 and 1797, with three other books along the same line.[28]

In the Discourses he had added an examination of Mohammedanism to his comparative studies of pagan religion and philosophy,[29] concluding that Mahomet

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[27] *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XVI, 116-17.

[28] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations, with Remarks on M. DuPuis's Origin of All Religions, and on the Allegorizing Talents of M. Boulanger* [1799], XVII, 129-366; *Socrates and Jesus Compared* [1803], XVII, 400-39; *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared With Those of Revelation*, XVII, 367-519.

[29] *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XVI, 312-75.

> with natural advantages greatly superior to those of Jesus . . . with the knowledge of Christianity, and a persuasion of its divine origin, was so far from making any improvement upon it, that every thing that is really valuable in his system was derived from it, and that whenever he departed from its principles, every thing that he advanced was wild and absurd.[30]

His second work of this kind, *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations*, was inspired by Louis Mathieu Langlès' claim that Judaism and Christianity, as well as the religions of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and China are all derived from Hinduism.[31] Priestley, following the more cautious line of Sir William Jones, England's great eighteenth century Orientalist,[32] conceded that Hinduism was of great antiquity, and probably the source of much in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religion, but the radically different tenets of Mosaic religion demonstrated its independent origin.[33] Contrast the Old Testament's description of the creation as the immediate result of the divine command with the fanciful Hindu conceptions involving emanation, absorption, and intercourse between deities. Contrast the Bible's affirmative view of the body with Hinduism's hatred of matter and unwarranted belief in immaterial souls. Contrast Mosaic radical monotheism with the variety of inferior deities who serve Hinduism's Supreme

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[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 372-73.

[31] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, XVII, 139.

[32] Sir William Jones, *On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India* [London, 1799], *The Works of Sir William Jones* (13 vols.; London: Printed for John Stockdale and John Walker, 1807), Vol. III.

[33] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, XVII, 146-52. For his information on Hinduism Priestley relied principally on the reports of Sir William Jones, *op. cit.*

Being. Other peoples, East and West, succumbed to the influence of this ancient Indian religion, but the Hebrews, who were not nearly so civilized as their neighbors, maintained a far superior theology. It is evident from such facts as these, Priestley argued, "that nothing but such a supernatural interposition as that which Moses relates could have prevented that one nation from being contaminated with it [i.e. Hinduism]."[34]

Priestley concluded this work with brief critiques of two other notorious treatises which attempted to undermine Christianity's uniqueness by appealing to the data of comparative religion. One of these was by Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, who, in his *Dissertation sur Saint-Pierre* (1770)[35] argued that the New Testament portrayal of the apostle Peter derived from pagan mythology, particularly from the god Janus, who, like Peter, was associated with doors and gates. Priestley dismissed the essay as a contrived confusion of pagan fantasy and scriptural history.[36] The other book was Charles Francois Dupuis' *Origine de tous les cultes ou Religion universelle*,[37] which argued that all religions, including Christianity, derive from the primitive worship of nature, and that all are mythological expressions of reverence for the life giving forces of the heavens

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[34] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, XVII, 189.

[35] Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, *Une dissertation sur Saint-Pierre*, *Oeuvres de Boulanger* (8 vols.; Paris, 1792), VI, 158-85.

[36] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, XVII, 360-66.

[37] Paris, 1795.

(particularly the sun) and the earth. Again, Priestley's response was to insist that while such attempts may explain pagan religions, to allegorize persons and events presented in Scripture is simply to overlook the plentiful evidence for their historicity.[38] We shall describe the nature of this historical evidence later.

Priestley's next effort of this kind, Socrates and Jesus Compared, deeply impressed Thomas Jefferson, and it was at his urging[39] that Priestley undertook The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared with Those of Revelation, which was finished only a few days before his death.[40]

Socrates and Jesus Compared emphasized that the teachings and conduct of Jesus surpassed those of the greatest of the heathens, in spite of the fact that Socrates enjoyed a superior education and an equal "natural capacity."[41] Socrates' chief liabilities were his acceptance of polytheism, his lack of certainty concerning a future state, his failure to address the masses, his (by comparison with

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[38] A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos, XVII, 320-59.

[39] Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Life and Correspondence 1787-1804, I, Part II, 508-09.

[40] Ibid., p. 527. Jefferson sent John Adams a copy of this book in July, 1813, and by the next year Adams was studying A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and Other Ancient Nations. F. C. Manuel suggests that it was Priestley who awakened Adams' interest in comparative religion (The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959], p. 272). See also Haraszti, op. cit., pp. 288-90.

[41] Socrates and Jesus Compared, XVII, 424.

Jesus) less authoritative manner, his frequent involvement in debate over "trifles," and, of course, his failure to perform miracles.[42]

The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy was an expansion of the comparison Priestley had offered in the 1797 Discourses and the criticisms here brought against Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans are only more detailed versions of those offered in that work. Priestley does, however, go on to claim that there was a steady decline in the truth content of classical philosophy from Pythagoras to Marcus Aurelius.

> Thus we have seen at the commencement of our inquiry, all the more intelligent Greeks retained the belief . . . [in] one Supreme Being, the maker of the world . . . though aided by a multiplicity of inferior ones in the government of it: of the constant attention of this great Being to all human affairs, of his love of virtue . . . ; that the souls of all men are immortal, and will be . . . rewarded or punished . . . in a future state. But as we have advanced, we have found these principles and motives of moral conduct grow more obscure . . . other principles, utterly inconsistent with them, being generally received . . . the last of these sects, viz. that of the Epicureans . . . disclaimed all belief of wisdom and design in the construction of the universe, and of the providence of God . . . All the sects . . . abandoned the belief of a future state; and yet with respect to mental ability, the founders of these sects may be classed among the first of the human race; sagacious, thoughtful, and laborious, in the extreme.

The conclusion seemed obvious.

> What prospect was there, then, of the world ever becoming more enlightened by human wisdom? . . .
>
> But what men could not do for themselves, it pleased God to do for them; and after giving much light to one particular nation, . . . he sent Jesus Christ, with abundant evidence of a divine mission, to be the light of the whole world.[43]

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[42] Ibid., pp. 402-39.

[43] The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared with Those of Revelation, XVII, 518-19.

But the comparative superiority of Scriptural teaching to that of heathen religion and philosophy is not the only internal evidence that the former contain divine communications. The very tone of its authors and the bearing of its principal figures substantiate its claims to offer revealed truth.

No one can believe Moses to have been an impostor who reads of his deep piety, his steadfast love for his ungrateful people, his honesty concerning his own failings, and his extreme reluctance to assume any authority.[44] The earnestness, affection, and "natural" attitude toward the great events of Israel's past displayed by him in Deuteronomy alone make it "barely possible" for anyone to read this book through and remain in doubt that he himself wrote it and that the events described in it and the rest of the Pentateuch actually happened.[45]

Similar arguments hold true for Jesus. His remarkable dignity, propriety of conduct, and authoritative manner of speaking, especially when seen in the light of his lack of education and humble birth, are explicable only on the basis of a special relationship with God. So also is his unshakable confidence in the truth and universal triumph of his religion, even in the face of betrayal, torture, and death. No impostor could make such exalted claims for himself and his doctrines and maintain, at the same time, such a consistently rational, modest, and compassionate demeanor.[46]

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[44] *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, XV, 258-59.

[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 259-60.

[46] Discourses *Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XVI, 166-81, 220-63.

> Such an uniform propriety of conduct, free from all inconsistency and extravagance, equally excludes the ideas of enthusiasm, or a heated imagination. If any man was ever in his right mind, it was Jesus . . . The only conclusion, therefore, from these premises, viz. that he actually had a divine mission, must be adopted.[47]

If one wonders whether such figures as Moses and Jesus are creatures of fiction, the answer is that the spirit of integrity which permeates all the books of Scripture, combined with the most manifest marks of sincere piety and benevolence, make it impossible to question the honesty of their authors. Those readers who themselves are upright in character and of a devout mind cannot fail to perceive the same qualities in the biblical writers.

> Writing from the heart, they write to the hearts of all persons whose characters resemble their own.[48]

But all this internal evidence does not stand alone. The favorable impression it conveys "concerning the character of the Scripture historians, and the persons whose history they write," while sufficient of itself to convince us of their integrity, also serves to "prepare the mind for a serious and candid examination of the external evidence, which would presently appear superior to that of any other history whatever."[49]

However, before considering the historical evidence for the special revelations recorded in Scripture, we should note Priestley's numerous and sometimes radical qualifications of Scripture's authority.

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[47] *Ibid.*, p. 263.

[48] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture for the Use of the Pulpit and Private Families* [1803-04], XI, 14.

[49] *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, XVII, 28.

2. Biblical Criticism

Priestley's view of the Scripture foreshadowed that of modern liberal theology in that he combined a high regard for its authority with a frank rejection of its infallibility. Many of his critical judgments anticipated the most radical findings of nineteenth and twentieth century scholars, and were, indeed, so far ranging that they threatened to undermine the foundation upon which his own historical arguments for Christianity were built. Priestley was himself aware of this danger and sought to guard against it. The result was a curious amalgam of opinions--some surprisingly advanced and others extremely conservative.

He arrived at one of his most radical ideas, that the biblical writers were not themselves divinely inspired, at the very beginning of his theological career.[50] While serving in his first pastorate at Needham Market (1755-1758) he became interested in examining all the Old and New Testament texts relating to the doctrine of the atonement, and in the course of this study came to the rather startling conclusion that the sacred text was not produced by supernatural influence and, furthermore, that the reasoning of the apostle Paul was, at many points, defective.

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[50] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 35-40. Conyers Middleton, in his *A Letter to Dr. Waterland* [London, 1731], *Miscellaneous Tracts* (London: Published for Richard Manby and H. S. Cox, 1752), pp. 135-177, had earlier denied the plenary inspiration of Scripture, and went on, as we shall see Priestley did, to argue that such a doctrine only weakens Scripture's authority (e.g., "Reflections on the Variations or Inconsistencies which are found among the Four Evangelists in their different Accounts of the same Facts," published posthumously in his *Miscellaneous Tracts*, pp. 21-75; but Priestley never acknowledged any debt to him, even when an opponent pointed out certain similarities in their positions (see the editor's note, *Two Letters to Dr. Newcome, Bishop of Waterford, on the Duration of Our Saviour's Ministry* [1780], XX, 136).

He included his opinion of the latter in a treatise on the atonement which was submitted to Nathaniel Lardner. Lardner was sufficiently impressed by the young clergyman's critique of the atonement to encourage its publication, but he objected strongly to the strictures on apostolic dialectic, and so that portion of the treatise was omitted from what became Priestley's first theological publication, *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission*.[51] Lardner's disapproval did not deter Priestley from expanding his critique of Paul and submitting it separately to the press, but Andrew Kippis persuaded him to desist from publishing such a disturbing view before he was better known and his good character established. Kippis suggested that he might publish it "under the character of an unbeliever," but Priestley preferred to wait until it could appear under his own name. It finally did appear as a series of articles in Priestley's magazine, the *Theological Repository*, in 1770-1771 under the name, "Paulinus," a pseudonym which Priestley acknowledged was his.[52]

He publicly denied the divine inspiration of the biblical authors as early as 1773 in volume two of the *Institutes of Natural* and Revealed Religion,[53] although the most detailed presentation of his position did not appear until the series of "Essays on Inspiration" for the Theological Repository in 1784.[54]

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[51] *The Scripture Doctrine of Remission* [1761], later incorporated in "An Essay on the One Great End of the Life and Death of Christ," *Theological Repository* [I, 1769], VII, 203-97, 533-34. The volume number in brackets refers to the volume number of the *Theological Repository*.

[52] "Remarks on Romans 5:12-14," *TR* [II, 1770], VII, 365-68; "Observations Concerning Melchizedeck," *TR* [II, 1770], VII, 368-73; "Observations on the Abrahamic Covenant," *TR* [II, 1770], VII, 373-84; "Observations on Romans 5:12-14," *TR* [III, 1771], VII, 384-99; "Miscellaneous Remarks," *TR* [III, 1771], VII, 399-415.

Priestley's basic reason for rejecting the traditional Christian claim that the Bible is the work of the Spirit is, not surprisingly, that such a view weakens the apologetic effort.

> Christian divines having maintained the absolute inspiration of every word of the canonical books of Scripture, has been attended with very bad consequences, by laying the system of revelation open to so many insignificant, but plausible objections.[55]

These objections have consisted of pointing to obvious errors and inconsistencies in the biblical books, such as varying descriptions of the same occurrence, conflicting chronologies of Christ's life, attributions of illness to demoniacal possession, an unscientific cosmogony, and the misinterpretation of prophecies by both Old and New Testament authors.[56]

Priestley's response is to acknowledge the truth of all these charges, indeed, to demonstrate their truth in detail,[57] but also to insist that they do not affect the fundamental credibility of the Scriptural witness to revelation. On the contrary, when a Christian honestly admits there are inaccuracies in the record, but realizes that they are not essential to his faith in revelation, he experiences a personal sense of relief and, at the same time, strengthens his position against unbelievers.

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[53] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 210.

[54] "Essays on Inspiration," TR [IV, 1784], VII, 298-364.

[55] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 210.

[56] Priestley does not mention the specific authors of these charges, probably because they were typical of so many of the rationalist critics of revealed religion. For example, Spinoza, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (Hamburg, 1670); Bayle, Dictionnaire historique et critique (Rotterdam, 1697); Anthony Collins, The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered (London, 1727); Matthew Tindal, Christianity as Old as the Creation (London, 1730); Annet, The Resurrection of Jesus Christ Considered by a Moral Philosopher (London, 1744).

[57] For example, "Essays on Inspiration," TR, VII, 298-364.

> While we considered all the writers of the books of Scripture as having been dictated to by the Holy Spirit, and consequently that there could be no error . . . in any of their writings, we still thought ourselves obliged, by the super-abundant evidence for revealed religion, to struggle with all the difficulties which that hypothesis laid us under; yet it is certainly a great relief to us, to find that every thing which is really valuable in the system of revelation may be retained without that doctrine of inspiration which we find . . . lays it open to so many embarrassing objections.[58]

One of these embarrassing objections is to Moses' account of the creation of the world and the fall of man in Genesis 1-3. Such notions as that the world was created in six days, that work and birth pangs are punishments for sin, that serpents crawl upon the earth and eat dust (a blatant biological falsity) as a consequence of the fall, and, as is suggested a bit later, that the rainbow was given at the cessation of the Flood (Genesis 9) may contain certain elements of truth, but they are certainly contrary to the evidences of nature. Yet to doubt them in no way affects the certainty of Moses' divine mission and the central truths of Old Testament religion. It is not necessary to suppose that Moses was infallible or impeccable in order to accept his claim to have received revelations and to have performed miracles. When he describes events to which he was himself a witness, descriptions unchallenged by other contemporary records and which would never have been accepted by posterity if false, then we must believe his testimony, but when he speaks of things which he could only have learned from others

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 301.

> he must be considered as being in the same circumstances with many other writers, who, notwithstanding the pains they took to get good information, were liable to be misled themselves, and therefore may have undesignedly misled others.[59]

Most probably the early part of Genesis is an attempt to account for death and evil which Moses, or some other person before him, thought the most likely to be true; or it may be an allegory. In any case, the cosmogony it offers is far superior to such fanciful ones as are found in Hesiod and other pagan writers since it defends the transcendence and unity of God, and portrays man as morally responsible.[60]

Another troublesome objection to the infallibility of the biblical authors is that they seem frequently to have misinterpreted divine prophecy. Priestley readily admits such to be the case.[61] The Old Testament writers apparently formed mistaken opinions both with regard to the times at which certain prophecies were to be fulfilled and with regard to the character of the Messiah. As proof of this he points to the fact that there is no evidence that any of the Jews, for all the prophecies concerning it, knew exactly when their national prosperity was to be restored, and that they seemed to have expected it much sooner than has actually been the case. Moreover, although Daniel 9 is filled with notes of time pertaining to the coming of the Messiah, no one knew exactly when that would be.[62] Finally, in spite of numerous prophecies concerning a future Deliverer, the Jews were unable to perceive that some of them apply to a prince of the family of David who will eventually restore the temporal blessings of the nation (e.g. Amos 9, Isaiah 11-12), while others refer to a quite different figure, the Messiah, who must suffer and die, and whose kingdom is spiritual (e.g. Isaiah 52-53, Daniel 7-9).[63] The conclusion, therefore, is that "the ancient Israelites, and, as far as appears, even the prophets also, were left to themselves with respect to the interpretation of prophecy, and they accordingly fell into great mistakes."[64]

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[59] Ibid., pp. 304-05.

[60] Ibid., pp. 304-12.

[61] Ibid., pp. 313-30, 330-45.

To say that this is true of the people of the Old Testament leads us to expect that it is true of the "Christian prophets," or apostles and authors of the New Testament as well, and we find it to be so. For example, Peter, in Acts 2:25-28, interprets Psalm 16: 8-11 Christologically, and yet if this view were previously unknown to us, we would doubtless conclude that the author, probably David, is simply referring to himself.[65] Psalm 22 was obviously believed by the evangelists, particularly John, to refer to Jesus' sufferings, and a striking coincidence of circumstances does exist, but we are not, therefore, authorized to infer that David had anything in view beyond his own case when he wrote it, since the correspondence to his own life provides sufficient explanation, and he does not offer it as prophecy, which he certainly would do if such were the case.[66]

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[62] Notes on all the Books of Scripture, XII, 307.

[63] "Observations on the Prophecies relating to the Messiah, and the Future Glory of the House of David," TR [V, 1786], XII, 411-42.

[64] "Essays on Inspiration," TR, VII, 329.

[65] Ibid., pp. 323-24.

The evangelists not only tended to overstate the case for Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; they sometimes erred in their ordering of the events of his life. This is the only plausible explanation for the sometime conflicting accounts to which skeptics of the gospel record point.

Earlier harmonists, notably James Macknight in England,[67] had attempted to resolve this difficulty by supposing that incidents agreeing in almost every respect, but differing in any one particular, were distinct and occurred at different times. Thus, Jesus must have driven the moneychangers from the Temple on two different occasions. And yet, writes Priestley, "it appears to me that, by the same rule, we might make more than one baptism of Jesus, more than one institution of the Lord's Supper, more than one crucifixion, and more than one resurrection."[68] Such is the preposterous result of the effort to explain these differences on the assumption of plenary inspiration.

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[66] *Ibid.*, p. 324.

[67] James Macknight, *A Harmony of the Four Gospels in which the Natural Order of each is preserved* [London, 1756] (2nd ed. rev.; London: Printed for William Strahan, Richard Baldwin, William Johnston, Thomas Longman, and Robert Horsfield, 1763).

[68] *A Harmony of the Evangelists, in Greek, to Which are Prefixed Critical Dissertations* [1777], XX, 8.

The historicity of the gospels is substantiated, not by vainly attempting to demonstrate the infallibility of every line, but by pointing out that they, like even the most reliable secular histories which treat the same events, vary in minor ways while agreeing on the circumstances of importance. These very differences of detail argue for the truth of the main events, since they show that the authors must have written independently of each other and could not have been engaged in a pre-arranged hoax.[69]

The first accounts of Christ's life were probably reports of particular incidents used by the apostles in their preaching. These would not necessarily be offered in chronological order, since the apostles' primary concern was not biographical, but "to make their hearers good men, to affect mankind with a sense of the truth and greatness of his [Christ's] character, that they might live in the firm belief and expectation of his second coming."[70] Thus, these separate incidents of his life could become related to one another in topical, or other, ways quite different from the sequence in which they originally occurred. This would not affect the historicity of the events themselves.

> For, as every distinct story would necessarily be repeated entire, they [the apostles] would each of them fall into one uniform method of telling it, and all the parts of any story would cohere perfectly, when the connexion of the different stories with one another might be entirely lost. Besides, independent of constant and uniform repetition, the contiguous

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[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

> part of one thing cannot but have a closer connexion in the mind that contemplates them, than any two different things.[71]

This uniformity of expression produced by repetition explains the frequently similar expressions used by the gospel authors. The hypothesis that Christ's history first took form in detached parts which came to be associated in varying ways, when combined with the fact that the evangelists worked independently of each other, accounts for the gospels' differing arrangements.

Even those gospels whose authors were eyewitnesses to most of what they reported, *Matthew* and *John*,[72] may not always present the original sequence of events, either because their authors simply accepted the order which had become traditional by the time they decided to write a full account, or because later copyists misarranged their materials.[73]

Priestley's hypothesis concerning the origin of the gospels anticipates modern form criticism in that he too understands the gospels to consist of separate units whose forms were gradually fixed in the process of oral transmission. For example, he argues that the Sermon on the Mount was not delivered as a single discourse, but is a collection of Jesus' "moral maxims" delivered at different times and brought together for catechetical convenience. The series of "offenses" in Matthew 18:17 ff. and Jesus' instructions to the apostles in Matthew 10 are of the same character.[74]

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[71] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[72] For a discussion of Priestley's conservative position on biblical authorship see *infra*, pp. 116-23.

[73] *A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek*, . . . *Critical Dissertations*, XX, 71-73.

Priestley does not take the crucial next step of developing classes of literary forms into which the gospel materials are to be analyzed; nevertheless, he does see that their content and arrangement were affected by the homiletical and catechetical needs of the early Christian community. The gospels did not originate as the inspired literary productions of individual historians, but as separate parts adapted for mouth to mouth communication.

Priestley even went so far as to assert that certain sections incorporated by the evangelists in their histories may be spurious, notably the accounts of Christ's birth in Matthew and Luke.[75] Although proper weight must be given to "the positive testimony, very circumstantially related by persons of such respectable character,"[76] it is also true that the Virgin Birth was apparently denied by or unknown to many of these evangelists' fellow Christians, who would have been well disposed to believe it. Moreover, the Matthean and Lucan nativity stories are not consistent with the remainder of their authors' gospels, another indication that the former are later inauthentic additions.[77]

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[74] _Notes on all the Books of Scripture_, XIII, 198; _A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek_, . . . _Critical Dissertations_, XX, 13.

[75] For a more detailed discussion of Priestley's scriptural reasons for denying the miraculous conception see _infra_, pp. 213-17.

[76] _An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers; Proving that the Christian Church was at first Unitarian_ [1786], VII, 82.

[77] _Ibid._, pp. 82-84.

Priestley's study of Christ's life also led him to conclude that Jesus' public ministry could not have lasted much more than one year. His perusal of Nicholas Mann's _Of the True Years of the Birth and Death of Christ_ (1733) first brought the idea to his attention, and he found that his subsequent researches confirmed Mann's position.[78] In a series of articles for the _Theological Repository_ describing a proposed gospel harmony, Priestley set forth his reasons for believing in a one year ministry,[79] and these were later expanded into the "Critical Dissertations" which prefaced his harmonies in Greek and English, published in 1777 and 1780 respectively.[80]

Mann had arrived at his hypothesis by his interpretation of Daniel's prophecy of seventy weeks (9:24 ff.) to which he felt only a one year ministry could correspond. He further supported his case by pointing out that (1) many of the early Christian fathers (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, etc.) held the same opinion; (2) all the gospels except John apparently suppose it; (3) even John's account encompasses no more than two passovers if we acknowledge that chapter 6 has been transposed from its original location between chapters 4 and 5, and that the word "passover" in 6:4 is a later conjectural emendation.[81]

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[78] _TR_, II (1770), 38.

[79] _TR_, II (1770), 41-59, 98-122, 230-43, 313-27; _TR_, III (1771), 462-69.

[80] _A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek_, . . . _Critical Dissertations_, XX, 3-118; _A Harmony of the Evangelists, in English, with Critical Dissertations, Paraphrases, and Notes_ [1780], XX, 3-5, 19-118, 508-10.

Priestley accepts all these arguments except the one derived from Daniel (for which he offers another explanation which supports his own dates for Christ's birth and death, 7 B.C. and 29 A.D.[82]) and suggests additional ones. (1) The fathers could never have spoken of a one year ministry if that had not been the generally received opinion. (2) Since Luke so carefully dates the year in which John the Baptist began to preach, it is unlikely that he would omit the infinitely more important date of Christ's death if it had occurred any more than a year later. (3) Irenaeus, who assembles every possible evidence to prove Christ's ministry was more than a year, fails to mention the reference to a passover in John 6:4, which he certainly would have done if the term had been present in his version of the gospel. (4) It is unlikely, considering our Lord's numerous miracles and discourses, that "the incredulity of the people could hold out, or that the malice of his enemies could be restrained so long as one year" in such a small country. Similarly, it is easier to account for the misunderstanding of Christ's mission by the apostles, even after his death, on the supposition of a short ministry. (5) The evangelists never use such phrases as "the year following" or "after one _or_ after two years," which they would be expected to do if that much time had elapsed. (6) Herod would never have mistaken Jesus for John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1) if the former had been active as much as a year before John's death, the common assumption of those who assert a two or three year ministry. (7) Every pious Jew was expected to visit Jerusalem three times a year, so we may easily account for the four visits recorded by John within that time span. (8) Since much of what the evangelists record occurred in the brief periods just after Jesus' first appearance in Galilee and just before his death, an extended public ministry would necessitate a belief in lengthy and perplexing omissions from the gospel records.[83]

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[81] _A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek_, . . . _Critical Dissertations_, XX, 49-51.

[82] _Ibid._, pp. 19-36.

In addition to conceding that the evangelists and apostles sometimes erred in their interpretations of prophecy and in their ordering of Christ's life, Priestley was also willing to admit that they, like the rest of their countrymen, mistakenly attributed mental disorders to evil spirits.[84] Priestley even dared to suggest that Christ himself was ignorant on this point, since to suppose that he knew better than he spoke would be to accuse him of dishonesty.[85]

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[83] A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek, . . . Critical Dissertations, XX, 47-56. Priestley defended his position against the criticisms of William Newcome, Bishop of Waterford, in Two Letters to Dr. Newcome, Bishop of Waterford, XX, 119-200, and A Third Letter to Dr. Newcome, Bishop of Waterford [1781], XX, 201-24. Newcome had objected to Priestley's one year hypothesis in the notes for his own An English Harmony of the Four Evangelists [London, 1778] (London: Printed for Samuel Bagster, 1827).

[84] "Essays on Inspiration," TR, VII, 343.

[85] Ibid., pp. 349-50.

But this obvious lack of the "knowledge of nature" had no effect on their divine mission and should not hinder our faith in it. It was certainly necessary that Christ and the apostles perform miracles, this being the surest evidence of a divine mission, but since the visible effect was all that was necessary for this purpose, and not a knowledge of the way in which the Deity operated in such cases, they might be as ignorant of the cause of a disease and its cure as anyone else.

> For, whatever was the nature of that disorder [i.e. madness], they were enabled to cure it, and in a manner that plainly showed it was not by any natural means, but by supernatural agency. Indeed, their ignorance of the nature of the disorder is itself an evidence that the cure of it was not affected by them, but by God alone, in a miraculous way; and all that was of any consequence to their purpose was to show that God was with them, and that it was *he*, and not *they*, who did these works; which is the very thing that our Saviour said with respect to himself, viz. that it was *the Father within him*, or acting by him, *who did the works*, John XIV. 10.[86]

It is not surprising that the leading light of Rational Dissent, with his low Christology and moralistic soteriology, found the "reasoning" of the apostle Paul uncongenial. Priestley questioned the logic of many specific texts, but his criticism focussed on two issues: Paul's application of Old Testament passages to Christ and his attitude toward the Law. The chief examples of the former were to be found in Hebrews, which Priestley believed, considering the similarity of its style of closing and general intent to other Pauline epistles, was probably written by him.[87] The first chapter of Hebrews, which is devoted almost entirely to quoting passages from the Psalms as proofs of Christ's "dignity," is one of the plainest examples, Priestley believed, of the Apostle's misuse of texts which refer, not to a Son God, but either to an historically contemporaneous figure like David or Solomon, or to God Himself. The same is true of Hebrews 2:5-9, 11-13, and Ephesians 4:8.[88]

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[86] *Ibid.*, pp. 343-44.

[87] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XIV, 345-46.

Paul was correct in maintaining against the other apostles that Gentile Christians need not observe the ceremonial Jewish Law, but his zeal to defend this position sometimes carried him too close to antinomianism. An instance is Galatians 3:11, 12 in which he appeals too "hastily" to the authority of Habbakuk 2:4, "the just shall live by his faith," in favor of the doctrine of justification by faith in opposition to works. An examination of the context of the Habbakuk passage reveals that there "faith," if it is so translated, is not contrasted with obedience to the Law, but means belief in the fulfillment of the Divine prophecies; however, the word is probably more appropriately translated "faithfulness" in the sense of integrity or uprightness,[89] which gives the sentence a far more moralistic meaning, i.e., "The just shall live by his uprightness."[90]

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[88] "Miscellaneous Remarks," TR, VII, 399-400.

[89] "Faithfulness" is the variant reading in the R.S.V.

[90] "Observations in Romans 5:12-14," TR, VII, 393-94.

It is to Paul's credit that he was "aware of the objection to his doctrine of faith and grace, as encouraging licentiousness."[91] In Romans 6:1, 2, 15 he himself raises the charge and attempts to refute it, but the answer he offers is only a disappointingly vague and faulty allusion to the analogy between our baptism and Christ's death.

> *Baptism* is the instituted manner of our taking upon us the Christian profession. But this is quite a general idea, and hath no more relation to the death . . . of Christ, than it hath to any part of his life . . . For we neither *die unto sin*, nor *live with God* . . . in the same sense in which Christ "*died unto sin*," and lived or "rose again unto God." For Christ had no sin of his own to die unto, or to cease from; "He died" only *on account, or in consequence of our sins*; whereas *we*, by *dying unto sin*, really *cease to sin*. Again, by Christ's living unto God, is meant *his rising again by the power of God his Father*; whereas our *living unto God must be understood in a different* manner, viz. *our living according to the will of God*.[92]

And yet, in spite of the several inadequacies which he believed existed in Paul's argumentation, Priestley could affirm that "the bulk of his epistles consist of excellent sentiments, nervous eloquence, striking figures, just and, generally, clear reasoning."[93] What he has tried to do is contribute to a more accurate evaluation of the Apostle by balancing the many descriptions of unqualified praise with an account of his faults. Both kinds of endeavor are necessary, the "displaying the excellencies of great personages or writers, in order to excite our admiration and engage our imitation," and the description of weaknesses "to guard us against their foibles."[94]

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[91] *Ibid*., p. 398.

[92] *Ibid*., p. 399.

[93] "Miscellaneous Remarks," *TR*, VII, 413.

Besides, Paul is always careful to say, as anyone would be, when he is stating a truth directly revealed to him, such as the fact of Christ's resurrection. Therefore, in all other cases in which he contents himself with reasoning only, without claiming any special authority, we may suppose that his opinions are his own, and that in such cases he is making no claim to be infallibly inspired.[95]

Underlying Priestley's approach to the matter of inspiration are what he calls two "axioms."

> 1, Divine communications have never been made where the reason which God originally gave to man, was sufficient for his instruction. 2, No messenger from God is to be considered as inspired by him, any farther than he himself pretends to be so, or than the object of his mission required.[96]

With regard to the former he observes that to assume God would communicate by inspiration that which is ascertainable by reason would be an inefficiency uncharacteristic of Him. When one considers that Divine Providence has seen fit to trust the transmission of Scriptural revelation to generations of uninspired copyists, it is logical to assume that the original revelation was likewise communicated to unaided human reason--"the apostles being naturally as capable of relating and writing an account of what they heard and saw, as other persons could be to copy the account after them."[97]

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[94] Ibid.

[95] "Essays on Inspiration," TR, VII, 340-41.

[96] Ibid., p. 299.

Priestley declares that he can see no meaning or consistency in the provision of witnesses to accompany Christ in order to transmit to posterity a true and credible account of his life, doctrine, and miracles, if, after all, it was God's intention to supersede this testimony by supernaturally inspired books.[98]

Priestley here expresses an idea suggested over a century earlier by Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan (1651), namely, that it is impossible for those not divinely inspired to know whether those who do claim to be inspired speak truthfully.[99] Therefore, the effort to convince skeptics of the truth of Scripture's testimony cannot depend upon claims of its divine inspiration, but must rely upon the assumption that its evidences are of the kind capable of convincing any rational person.

As for the second axiom, that no messenger from God can be any more inspired than he claims to be or than fulfillment of his sacred duty requires, Priestley was willing to concede that Moses, the prophets, Christ, and the apostles had all received supernatural assistance and/or communications. The former was required to perform the miracles necessary to authenticate their divine mission; the latter to inform them of their special calling, to enable them to prophesy, and to reveal such supernatural doctrines as bodily resurrection.[100] But in all other areas it is clearly evident that God allowed them to follow "the natural bent of their own minds," and, consequently, we may expect to find both in their actions and writings "true human characters, attended with natural human failings and human excesses."[101]

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[97] A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek, . . . Critical Dissertations, XX, II.

[98] Ibid.

[99] "How God speaketh to a man immediately, may be understood by those well enough, to whom he hath so spoken; but how the same should be understood by another, is hard, if not impossible to know. For if a man pretend to me, that God hath spoken to him supernaturally, and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce, to oblige me to beleeve it . . . . How then can he, to whom God hath never revealed his Wil immediately (saving by the way of natural reason) know when he is to obey, or not to obey his Word, delivered by him, that sayes he is a Prophet?" Leviathan, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1904), pp. 270-71.

Lest anyone conclude that these criticisms of biblical writers undermine faith, Priestley takes pains to show that they affect neither Christianity's credibility nor Scripture's authority. On the contrary, by removing the doctrinal millstones of inspiration and infallibility from Christianity's neck, belief, and the task of defending it, become much easier.

To illustrate this point Priestley suggests that if the only history of Rome we possessed was Livy's, and that we assumed it was necessary to accept all or none of it as true, we would probably doubt even the most credible portions of the narrative because of the *a priori* necessity of believing such legends as a wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. On the other hand, we would believe the better evidenced parts of the history more firmly if we discovered we were free to reject the fables. The same holds true for the Scriptures.

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[100] "Essays on Inspiration," *TR*, VII, 298-364.

[101] "Miscellaneous Remarks," *TR*, VII, 414.

> Our faith in every thing that is important in them will be much strengthened when we find ourselves at liberty to reject what is not essential to them.[102]

Those who refuse to acknowledge deficiencies in the Bible on the grounds that "we shall never know where to stop, till we reject the whole" disregard the plain teaching of experience, for there are many persons who do not subscribe to infallibility who nevertheless remain firm believers in Christianity.[103]

Although an unbeliever may at first rejoice to think that liberal Christians are moving nearer his position, he will soon find that although the gulf between them has narrowed, it has become even more impassable from the true believer's side. Moreover, the unbeliever may be induced to look back and then cross over to embrace Christianity when he discovers that there are serious Christians who reject the very things in it which offended him.[104]

And yet, in spite of these numerous and far reaching criticisms of the Scriptures, Priestley remains staunchly conservative with regard to the authorship and date of the biblical books. Moses must have written the Pentateuch, and have been an eyewitness of all that occurred during his lifetime. How else to account for the "numerous particulars of persons, times, and places . . . never found in Romances,"[105] or for the fact that the Israelites believed Moses to have written it at the time--despite the sole object of his writing it having been "to enforce the observance of institutions to which his nation was extremely averse and even continued to be so for several centuries afterwards"?[106] Surely they, of all people, had the best reasons, and were in the best position, to deny Mosaic authorship, and yet they never did, and never have, done so.

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[102] "Essays on Inspiration," *TR*, VII, 302-03.

[103] No doubt Priestley considered himself a prominent example.

[104] "Essays on Inspiration," *TR*, VII, 303.

Similar arguments support the contemporaneous origin and reliability of the other historical books. What Priestley writes in defense of the historicity of *I* and *II Chronicles* generally applies to the others. There may be minor terminological or chronological errors, but

> the foundation, however, was evidently a real history . . . ; for such particulars of names, and other circumstances, would never have been invented by any person, as no imaginable purpose could be answered by it; and the hazard of making mistakes, and being thereby exposed, when they were first published, would have been very great.[107]

Joshua wrote *Joshua*.[108] Samuel probably wrote *Judges*[109] and, along with Gad and Nathan, *I* and *II Samuel*.[110] *I* and *II Kings* were compiled by Ezra from "authentic records written near the time of the transactions";[111] the last four chapters of the book which bears his name were written by him, and the first six by an earlier, but unknown person.[112] Nehemiah wrote *Nehemiah*.[113] *Esther*'s author was an anonymous contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah.[114] *Job*, "probably the oldest artificial composition that has come down to us,"[115] was certainly written as early as the time of Moses.[116] The *Psalms* were composed by different persons, but chiefly David, and Ezra was probably responsible for their collection and arrangement.[117] Solomon wrote all but the last two chapters of *Proverbs*,[118] as well as *Ecclesiastes*[119] and the *Song of Solomon*,[120] the last named being strictly a love song written on the occasion of his marriage to the daughter of the king of Egypt. The books of the prophets were all written by the prophets for whom they are named--

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[105] *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, XVII, 333.

[106] *Ibid.*, p. 334.

[107] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XI, 482-83.

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 320.

[110] *Ibid.*, p. 365.

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[111] *Ibid*., p. 413.

[112] *Ibid*., XII, p. 3.

[113] *Ibid*., p. 12.

[114] *Ibid*., p. 22.

[115] *Ibid*., p. 32.

[116] *Ibid*., p. 31.

[117] *Ibid*., p. 66.

[118] *Ibid*., p. 119.

[119] *Ibid*., p. 132.

[120] *Ibid*., p. 140.

even *Isaiah*, which is all by one author,[121] and *Daniel*, which was composed during the Babylonian Captivity.[122]

Among the gospels, *Matthew* and *John* are the more reliable because their authors were apostolic eyewitnesses to much of what they relate. Mark, the disciple of Peter, and Luke, the companion of Paul, were certainly well informed, but "we perceive more characters of time, and more marks of an orderly narrative, in the transitions from story to story" in the first two, and in *Mark* more than in *Luke*.[123] The variations in their accounts argue for their independence of one another, except in the case of John, whose radically different rendering of Christ's history may be explained by his desire to correct and supplement the others and/or by the likelihood that being very old when he wrote or dictated his gospel, he did so in fragments which were misarranged by his followers.[124]

Certain portions of the gospels may be spurious or misarranged, and their authors mistaken about certain points, since, as we have seen, they are not the products of plenary inspiration; nevertheless, their essential historicity and traditional authorship are demonstrated by their acceptance as such by their contemporaries who were in the best position to know.[125] Furthermore, the knowledge of detail and the absence of conscious embellishment provide convincing internal evidence that "none but the persons to whom they are ascribed, or, which is the same thing, with respect to us, persons who enjoyed equal advantages for writing such histories, could have composed them."[126]

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[121] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

[122] *Ibid.*, p. 309-10.

[123] *A Harmony of the Evangelists in Greek*, . . . *Critical Dissertations*, XX, 70.

[124] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XIII, 5, 6, 8, 46, 47.

So too, *Acts* and all the New Testament epistles were actually written by their traditional authors: *Acts* by Luke,[127] all the so-called Pauline epistles by Paul,[128] *James* by the relation of Jesus and ruler of the Jerusalem church,[129] *I* and *II* *Peter* by Peter,[130] the three letters of *John* and *Revelation* by the apostle John,[131] *Jude* by the apostle Jude.[132] Having all been published near the time of the transactions they relate, and never doubted by contemporary friends or enemies; displaying emotional tones and particular allusions which correspond to the circumstances of the time as we know them from other sources; and being written, in most instances, to whole churches who would take pains to preserve them--all these factors support their authenticity and apostolic authorship.[133]

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[125] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[126] *A Harmony of the Evangelists, in Greek, . . . Critical Dissertations*, XX, p. 69.

[127] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XIII, 387.

[128] *Ibid.*, XIV, pp. 7, 25, 34, 57, 122, 144, 153, 195, 261, 289, 306, 323, 342, 345.

[129] *Ibid.*, p. 386.

[130] *Ibid.*, pp. 400-13.

[131] *Ibid.*, pp. 421, 437, 442.

[132] *Ibid.*, p. 439.

When one surveys Priestley's attitude toward the Scripture, there appears, at first glance, to be a strange incongruity between his radically negative views of inspiration, infallibility, and textual purity, and his conservatism with regard to authorship. That Priestley was "conservative" (or at least behind the most advanced views of his day) on this last issue is indicated by the fact that in England Hobbes had questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as early as 1651,[134] while one of Priestley's fellow Unitarians, Edward Evanson, made "the earliest formal attack on the traditional authorship of St. John's Gospel,"[135] as well as cast doubt on the authenticity of several Pauline epistles, in *The Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists* (1792).[136] The suggestion by the Deist Peter Annet that the origin of the gospels are unknown, and that they were written long after the events they record,[137] may not rate as a "formal" criticism, but it certainly implied a negative answer to the question of whether the New Testament offers eyewitness testimony.[138]

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[133] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

[134] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-76.

[135] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 479.

[136] Priestley replied in *Letters to a Young Man, Part II* [1793], XX, 352-462.

[137] [Peter Annet], *A Collection of the Tracts of a Certain Free Enquirer, Noted by his Sufferings for his Opinions* [London, 1750?], p. 306.

But the reason for this conjunction of radical and conservative opinions becomes clear in the light of Priestley's overall apologetic aim. To admit the fallibility of the biblical writers and the probability of textual corruptions frees the record of Christian revelation from many troublesome objections. At the same time, to insist upon the traditional authorship of the biblical books buttresses the claim that the record of Christian revelation is, in the main, historically true. This follows from the fact that all the traditional authors--from Moses to Paul--either lived contemporaneously with the principal events they describe or would have had access to accounts by contemporaries. One must acknowledge such accounts to be reliable if there is no indication that they were challenged by other contemporary witnesses, and since in the Bible's case no such challenges exist, one must accept the historicity of the biblical books.

It is this conviction that the books of Scripture do contain authentic history which enables Priestley to assert that we are free to treat the biblical writers as we would secular historians.

> The writers of the books of Scripture were *men*, and, therefore, *fallible*, but all that we have to do with them *is* in the character of *historians*, and *witnesses* of what they heard and saw. Of course, their credibility *is* to be estimated like that of other historians, viz. from the circumstances in which they wrote, as

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[138] Priestley was apparently unaware of the developments in biblical criticism on the Continent.

> with respect to their opportunities of knowing the truth of what they relate, and the biasses to which they might be subject.[139]

But to doubt that they were, in fact, in a position to be reliable historians and witnesses is, for Priestley, to undermine the strongest evidence for Christianity. This is because "there are no truths which more readily gain the assent of mankind, or are more firmly retained by them, than those of an historical nature, depending upon the testimony of others.[140]

Since the source of Christian revelation, the Bible, does rest upon such historical evidence, the Christian apologist is in a very strong position.

Therefore, Priestley can summarize the Christian's proper attitude toward biblical authority by saying,

> if you wish to know what, in my opinion, a Christian is bound to believe with respect to *the Scriptures*, I answer, that the books which are universally received as *authentic* are to be considered as faithful records of past transactions. No Christian is answerable for more than this.[141]

We now turn to a more detailed examination of Priestley's treatment of this historical evidence.

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[139] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part II, IV, 467.

[140] *A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France*, XXI, 118.

[141] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part II, IV, 467.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY

Students of the course of eighteenth century thought have noted a gradual shift from a reliance upon abstract speculation to a concentration on the concrete and the factual. As Carl Becker puts it:

> The age of reason had scarcely run half its course before the Philosophers were admitting the feebleness of reason, putting the ban on flippancy, and turning to the study of useful, that is to say, factual, subjects.[1]

In attempting to account for such an intellectual change Sir Leslie Stephen observes with proper caution that "we have not yet learnt the secret of the periodicity of intellectual effort";[2] yet both writers agree that a movement away from abstract speculation toward empirical investigation does characterize eighteenth century thought, and that a primary reason was the failure of pure rationalism, in theology and philosophy, to provide satisfactory answers to men's moral and metaphysical questions.[3] In theology the search for a rational religion consistent with the laws of Nature foundered on the growing awareness of nature's ambiguities, an awareness stimulated by both the orthodox Butler and the skeptical Hume. The philosophers too discovered that their Goddess

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[1] Becker, op. cit., p. 84.

[2] Stephen, op. cit., I, 316.

[3] Ibid., 316-23; Becker, op. cit., especially chaps. 2 and 3.

Reason did not point to a universe which supports human hopes and values, but, in the case of Hume, to complete skepticism, or, as in the case of Holbach[4] and Diderot,[5] to a world in which there is no God, all is mechanically determined, and man has no immortal soul.

One result of this disillusionment with abstract reason was a new appreciation for those forms of enquiry which deal with the concrete phenomena of society and nature--history, politics, economics, and natural science.

> For Hume's Essays and Butler's "Analogy," we have Burke's Speeches and Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations." Junius's Letters and a countless host of political pamphlets evoke the passions which in the previous generation had been called forth by Tindal, Collins, Woolston, and their opponents . . . Natural science in the early part of the century had been regarded with good-humored contempt as a pursuit of bugs, beetles, and mummies; and the "virtuoso" was one of the established topics for the delicate ridicule and coarse satire of Addison, Pope, Swift, and Shaftesbury. Now it was beginning to be recognized that such pursuits might be a creditable investment of human energy.[6]

Priestley's varied labors provide evidence for this growing interest in practical and factual subjects. In addition to his theological and philosophical writings he of course devoted considerable time to the scientific researches which brought him fame, but he also became involved in the political struggle of the Dissenters for religious liberty, defended the French Revolution, and wrote books on grammar, rhetoric, educational theory, economic reform, and history.

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[4] Paul Henri Thiry, baron d'Holbach, *Système de la Nature, ou des Lois du monde physique et du monde moral, par M. Mirabaud* (Paris, 1770).

[5] A. Vartanian, *Diderot and Descartes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

[6] Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 317, 322.

History received particular attention during the period. The roll of later eighteenth century historians is distinguished by such names as Gibbon, Hume, Robertson, Rollin, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Mably, Raynal, and Herder. No subject, says Becker, was more read or written about.[7] One reason, as both Becker and Stephen show, was the belief that investigation of man's past would yield the moral norms and religious certainties which philosophical speculation had failed to provide.[8] Becker quotes Priestley's observation, "Without history the advantages of our rational nature must have been rated very low,"[9] to substantiate the point.[10]

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[7] Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

[8] *Ibid.*, chap. 3, "The New History"; Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 320-23.

[9] *Lectures on History and General Policy*, XXIV, p. 31; quoted in Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

[10] Peter Gay has severely criticized this analysis of eighteenth century thought in *The Party of Humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 202-08. Gay rejects the idea that the period's increased interest in history and other "practical" subjects was motivated by a failure of philosophical nerve and argues that the *philosophes* became more, not less, bold in their skepticism as the century progressed. He also points out that the search for moral and metaphysical truths does not account adequately for the high caliber of history produced by men like Voltaire and Hume. The effect of Gay's criticisms, however, is not so much to refute what we might call the Stephen-Becker thesis, but only to emphasize what Becker says explicitly (p. 83), that the thesis cannot be taken as a complete explanation of the period's intellectual development. In defense of the thesis it can be argued that the very increase in speculative skepticism which Gay stresses stimulated the growing interest in more practical subjects, and that actual written history may frequently be better than the theoretical motives which first inspire it, especially when the writer possesses the genius of a Voltaire or Hume.

Hellenistic and Roman historians, beginning with Polybius and continuing through Livy and Tacitus, were the first to give formal expression to this understanding of history as *magistra vitae*, and their didactic view continued to be used to justify historical research until the advent of nineteenth century historicism with its insistence that history be studied for its own sake.[11] Evidence for the continued dominance of their conception is provided by the manuals devoted to defining the nature of history and explaining the method of studying and writing it, the so-called *Artes Historicae*, which began to appear in the sixteenth century and which proliferated in the two centuries following. All of them, in spite of individual differences, uphold the notion, after the manner of their Hellenistic and Roman predecessors, that knowledge of the past is worthwhile primarily because it provides moral and intellectual guidance to those in the present.[12]

Priestley's *Lectures on History and General Policy*, composed for delivery at Warrington Academy and published at Birmingham in 1788, is a late example of this genre. The three uses of history are, he tells us, to amuse, to improve the understanding, and to "strengthen the sentiments of virtue."[13] The first of these three uses is the least important, but insofar as it attracts us to expose ourselves to the intellectual and moral benefits of history it is not to be dismissed lightly.[14] To explain how history improves our understanding Priestley quotes from an earlier *Ars Historica*, Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1738).

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[11] See the article by George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History Before Historicism," *History and Theory* (1964), III, 291-315.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 304-06.

[13] *Lectures on History and General Policy*, XXIV, 27.

> "There are certain principles, and rules of life and conduct, which always must be true, because they are conformable to the invariable nature of things. He who studies history as he would philosophy, will soon distinguish and collect them; and by doing so, will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience."[15]

Note that Bolingbroke assumes, and Priestley with him, that history is to supplant philosophy as the source of moral and political knowledge. Such an assumption indicates the high regard in which men of the period, from skeptics like Bolingbroke to believers like Priestley, held historical study.

As for strengthening our love of virtue, history performs this function, Priestley believed, by revealing the beneficial effects which always follow the acts of upright men as well as the destructive consequences which inevitably follow vice. No matter what the bias of a particular historian may be, if he is faithful to "things as they have really come to pass, [he] cannot help giving a representation favorable to virtue."[16] Such an optimistic view of the pattern of the past enables Priestley to go on to assert that the study of history supports belief in Divine Providence. In fact, "the noblest object of attention to an historian . . . is the conduct of Divine Providence in the direction of human affairs."[17] He believed that careful examination of every event in its totality, "in all its connexions and most distant influences," will always show that everything terminates in good, and, therefore, that one who studies history cannot escape acknowledging a "moral governor" of the world.[18] Such an awareness certainly increases our affection for goodness, since "whatever suggests to us the idea of a Divine Being, either in the end or means of great events, must be favorable to piety and virtue."[19]

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

This esteem for historical knowledge which Priestley shared with his contemporaries helps to explain why he attributed so much importance to the historical evidence for Christianity. Since such a high regard for historical data was characteristic of the period, it was advantageous for the Christian apologist to rest his case upon such data if he could.

But Priestley's reliance upon historical evidence was not motivated simply by the desire to appeal to the spirit of his times. It was also consistent with his empirical epistemology of which we have spoken earlier.[20] For him, historical facts were included under the general term "experience," and one might appeal to them with the same confidence with which the scientist appealed to the results of his experiments.

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[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 421-22.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[20] *Supra*, pp. 64-71.

> . . . real history resembles the experiments made by the air pump, the condensing engine, or electrical machine, which exhibit the operations of nature . . . and are the ground work and materials for the most extensive and useful theories.[21]

Although *a posteriori* reasoning from nature could corroborate the truths of revelation, nature's testimony was, Priestley believed, so ambiguous that clarifying special revelations were necessary.[22] *A posteriori* reasoning from historical facts provided the incontrovertible evidence that such revelations, recorded in Scripture, had indeed occurred.

Priestley reveals how unfailing was his confidence in the apologetic value of historical knowledge toward the end of one of his last works, *A General History of the Christian Church*, in which, after offering a brief survey of the "progress of infidelity" during the eighteenth century, he nevertheless concludes that none of the numerous critics of Christianity have been able "to refute the historical evidence of the facts on which the Jewish and Christian revelations are founded."[23]

Priestley believed that historical data served the apologist in several ways. It substantiated the actuality of miracles, it demonstrated the fulfillment of prophecy, it showed that nothing less than supernatural intervention can account for the rise of

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[21] *Lectures on History and General Policy*, XXIV, p. 28.

[22] *Supra*, pp. 73-79.

[23] *A General History of the Christian Church*, X, 515.

Christianity, it proved the superior moral effects of Christian belief, and it enabled one to explain the development of the numerous corruptions of the original revelation. We shall examine each of these uses in turn.

1. Miracles

Priestley shared the assumption common among apologists of his day that miracles were a primary evidence for revelation. Although he never offers a precise, one sentence definition of the term, we may say, using his own words, that he understood a miracle to be an interruption of the usual course of nature by the Author of nature for the purpose of attesting the divine mission of those who communicate to men true knowledge of their Maker, their duty, and their expectations hereafter.[24] Indeed, such an interruption of the course of nature is "the only proper evidence" of a divine revelation, and "every other kind of evidence must necessarily be equivocal."[25]

Archbishop Tillotson and John Locke, a century earlier, had given classic expression to the view that miracles are the principal external proof of revelation,[26] and doubtless Priestley, who so admired Locke, believed that he was adhering to the Lockean tradition;

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[24] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part II, IV, 455-62 *passim*.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 456.

[26] Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, pp. 32-33; Tillotson, "The Miracles Wrought in Confirmation of Christianity," *op. cit*., III, 493 ff., quoted in McGiffert, *op. cit*., p. 197.

however, a significant difference distinguishes Priestley from these earlier rational supernaturalists. Both Tillotson and Locke qualified the proof value of miracles by maintaining that even if such outward signs accompanied a certain teaching, the teaching could not be accepted as of divine origin unless it was itself consistent with reason and our previous knowledge of God. As Tillotson puts it:

> Though a doctrine be attested by miracles, yet the matter of it may be so unreasonable and absurd, so unworthy of God, . . . that no miracles can be sufficient to give confirmation to it.[27]

Locke writes similarly:

> Even in those books which have the greatest proof of revelation from God, and the attestation of miracles to confirm their being so, the miracles are to be judged by the doctrine, and not the doctrines by the miracles.[28]

In other words, for both men internal evidence, a doctrine's inherent rationality, was the final criterion for even the most striking external evidence. But Priestley, appealing to an age which put greater store in tangible facts than in abstract reason, reversed the order, and placed the decisive weight on the external evidence provided by miracles. They were for him, as he said, "the *only* proper evidence" of a divine revelation, every other kind being "*necessarily equivocal*."[29]

Priestley emphasized the evidential value of miracles for several reasons. They were, given God's benevolent nature and man's intellectual limitations, both the most probable and the most effective means at God's disposal for authenticating revealed truth. Most important, their actuality rested upon the surest proof for any fact, that is, testimony proved reliable by impartial historical investigation.

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[27] Tillotson, *op. cit.*, quoted in McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

[28] Locke's *Journal*, quoted in J. J. Tayler, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

[29] *Supra*, p. 131. My italics.

The antecedent probability of their occurrence derives, in the first instance, from nature's indications of a supreme and benevolent Author, who, it therefore seems plausible, would make every effort to communicate to his creatures those truths which they cannot discover from nature itself, but upon which their welfare depends, notably, that there is a resurrection from the dead.[30] These truths are best conveyed when accompanied by attention-catching disruptions of the ordinary course of nature because "whenever any appearances become quite uniform, and constant, they cease to strike," whereas when the usual order is disrupted contrary to expectation, men's "attention is immediately roused, and they cannot be satisfied till they understand both the efficient and final cause of so strange an appearance." A little reflection, Priestley is confident, will satisfy them that only "he who ordained and established the course of nature, can alter it."[31] The objection that miracles may be performed by intelligent beings other than God, but superior to men Priestley simply dismisses by insisting that God would never allow such things to happen because it would undermine his most certain way of communicating his designs to his creatures.[32]

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[30] A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos, XVII, 313-15.

[31] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 109-10.

Having thus established the antecedent probability of miracles, Priestley must next evaluate the evidence for their having actually occurred. This evidence consists of testimony.

Priestley's reliance upon testimony was, of course, not unique. Earlier in the century prominent orthodox apologists--Richard Smalbroke, Thomas Sherlock, Zachary Pearce, and Gilbert West--had defended miracles on the basis of reliable testimony against the attacks of such Deists as Thomas Woolston and Peter Annet.[33] All these defenses derived their approach from Charles Leslie's _A Short and Easy Method with the Deists_, which appeared in 1697. Leslie, replying to doubts concerning certain biblical miracles expressed by Charles Blount in _The Oracles of Reason_ (1693), proposed four rules by which to test the truth of alleged matters of fact:

> First, that the matter of fact be such, as that men's outward senses, their eyes and ears, may be judges of it. Second, that it be done publicly, in the face of the world. Third, that not only public monuments be kept up in honour of it, but some outward actions to be performed. Fourth, that such monuments and such actions or observances be instituted and do commence from the time the matter of fact was done.[34]

Both the Old Testament and New Testament miracles, he asserted, meet these tests. One can be sure that they occurred at the time and in the manner described because false accounts would have been challenged and could not have survived. How, for example, "could Moses have persuaded 600,000 men that he had been through the sea in the manner related in Exodus if it had not been true? If he could, it would have been a greater miracle than the other."[35] Moreover, as Zachary Pearce pointed out in a subsequent book based on the same approach,[36] the testimony of such persons as Moses and the apostles ought to be believed because as contemporaries they had had ample opportunity to investigate the events which they reported; because to lie would have been to risk ruin of their reputations; and because, in the apostles' case, they had clung to their claims even when threatened with persecution.

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[32] _Ibid_., p. 111.

[33] Stephen, _op_. _cit_., I, 192-213.

[34] Quoted in _ibid_., p. 165.

Hume's essay "Of Miracles," included in An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,[37] appeared in 1748, and quickly became the principal challenge to the defenders of miracle as the guarantor of special revelation. In it Hume took direct issue with those who based the proof for miracles upon testimony by arguing that although past experience inclines us to believe witnesses who have no special reason to lie about or be deceived by the events they report; nevertheless, in the case of a miracle we are asked to believe in an event which is, by definition, contrary to an absolutely uniform experience. Confronted with conflicting evidence we must always choose the weightier, and since experience confirms that even the most honest witnesses sometimes err, whereas the experience against a miraculous event must necessarily be absolute, we never have the right to believe in any alleged miracle no matter how cogent the testimony for it may be. Or, to put it another way, one must always reject the greater miracle and false testimony is always less miraculous than an event which contradicts uniform experience.

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[35] The Truth of Christianity Demonstrated (1711), quoted in ibid., p. 167.

[36] Pearce, The Miracles of Jesus Vindicated (1729), pp. 2-4, quoted in ibid., pp. 202-04.

[37] Section 10. I shall refer to the text in Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding, ed. by A. Flew (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 115-36.

Hume goes on to re-enforce his principal argument by pointing out that although in it he is assuming that the testimony for a miracle is the best possible, in fact, it never really is. First, the witnesses have never been of sufficient number and education to ensure against self-delusion, nor of such unquestionable honesty as to ensure against their attempting to delude others, nor of such high reputation as to have much to lose if their fraud were exposed. Nor has any alleged miracle been performed so publicly as to render exposure unavoidable. Second, many people have strong motives for believing in miracles. Most men have a natural tendency to believe in prodigies because of the pleasant sensations of surprise and wonder, and this inclination for emotion to prevail over reason only increases when combined with religious enthusiasm. Third, the fact that miracles occur most frequently among backward peoples and decrease in frequency as civilization progresses suggests that supposed supernatural events originate from the ease with which barbaric peoples can be duped and from their ignorance of natural laws. Finally, Hume points out that the miracles wrought to prove the truths of one religion inevitably conflict with those reported in behalf of any other so that they are mutually destructive. Christians do not believe in pagan miracles, nor Protestants in Popish ones, not because these are not equally well attested (Hume takes pains to show that several are) but because, each group rejects the truths which the other's alleged miracles support.

Hume's final conclusion, then, is that no testimony, however strong, is sufficient to make us believe a miracle, and that the actual testimony we are offered in such cases is not even the strongest kind of testimony.

Such a thrust struck at the heart of Christian apologetic strategy as it had developed in the eighteenth century and no one strove harder to repel it than Priestley.

The Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion contain Priestley's earliest and essential defense,[38] but he continued to restate it in such works as _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_,[39] _Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion_,[40] and _Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion_.[41]

In the _Institutes_ he begins by pointing out what Hume had acknowledged, that the testimony of others is the source of the greater part of every person's knowledge and that we tend to believe in testimony because past experience has shown that men speak truthfully when there is no special reason for them to lie. But here agreement ends. Hume had argued that miracles must, by definition, contradict absolutely uniform experience and therefore testimony, which we know is not reliable uniformly, can never be strong enough to make us believe a miracle. Priestley answers that this overlooks the fact that defenders of revelation do not claim an absolutely uniform experience against interruptions of nature's course, but, on the contrary, believe that the Author of nature has occasionally departed from it. All Hume has done is to pit the experience of the present age against many former ones, an opposition which does not involve a contradiction since the course of nature may be uniform now, but may not have been formerly. Even if we supposed we lived at the time when the first miracle was performed, so that there was no precedent in our experience for it, we would have only an expectation that nature's past course would continue, not an absolute certainty that it would. The implication of Hume's position is that every new fact, such as the report to the king of Siam that water could become hard enough to bear the weight of men and carriages, must be dismissed as incredible.[42]

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[38] _Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion_, Part II, chaps. 2-4, 6, II, 109-69, 191-96.

[39] _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_, Part II, IV, 444-548.

[40] _Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion_, XV, 191-362.

[41] _Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion_, XVI, 1-418.

Priestley's response does point to a weakness in Hume's argument: his definition of a miracle as a solitary event which must contradict the whole course of experience. He has ignored the fact, which Priestley points out, that supernaturalists do not limit miracles to solitary exceptions, but maintain that there may be several such events of the same kind, as, for example, resurrections from the dead. It would seem that Hume's response to reports of such repeated exceptions, given his assumption here that the testimony is the strongest possible, could only be to say that our experience in these particular cases is not uniform. Such a conclusion may undermine the notion of striking interruptions of the course of nature, but it does so at the expense of the very notion of a uniform experience of the course of nature to which Hume is appealing as a proof against miracles.

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[42] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 113-16.

Moreover, as Priestley suggests in his reference to the Siamese reaction to reports of the strange phenomenon of ice, Hume's argument leads to difficulties in those cases where no one supposes that there is a miracle. Again, the problem arises when more than one exception to our experience of the course of nature is reported. In such a case, as Hume describes it, our own experience of nature's course remains absolutely uniform; our knowledge that the best testimony is not invariably trustworthy is unchanged; therefore, it would seem, according to Hume, we ought to reject subsequent reports just as confidently as the first one. Such a position would certainly prevent the acceptance of miracles, but it would also remove the very motive--doubt of an alleged law of nature--which frequently inspires the investigation that uncovers new natural laws. Priestley is therefore correct, I think, when he argues that the logic of Hume's position is to dismiss as incredible reports of any new fact which seems contrary to our experience.[43]

Thus, it can be argued that Hume's claim that no testimony, however strong, can suffice to compel our belief in a miracle is weakened by his unsatisfactory definition of miracle, and that Priestley has rightly pointed out the difficulty; however, Hume's other conclusion that we actually have no sufficient evidence that a miracle has ever been performed remains to be examined.

Priestley, following the lead of Leslie and his successors, maintained that the testimony in favor of the biblical miracles was just as reliable as that for other universally accepted historical facts. One evidence for this was, he argued, that many Old Testament and New Testament miracles were of such a kind that deception would have been impossible. For example, Moses' miracles were on a tremendous scale which affected whole nations; Jesus' instantaneous cures were of diseases which are either incurable or require a long treatment; the gift of tongues to thousands was a phenomenon which could not have been prearranged. Moreover, scriptural miracles were generally performed in the presence of great numbers. The nations of Israel and Egypt observed Moses' feats, while the fact that the mighty works of Jesus were known to all the Jews is clear from Peter's words in Acts 2:22: "Men of Israel . . . I speak of Jesus of Nazareth . . . made known to you through miracles . . . as you well know." Many of the witnesses to these miracles were predisposed to disbelieve them. Moses himself undertook his mission to free Israel from slavery apparently with great reluctance, while it is clear that neither the Egyptians nor the Hebrews were initially inclined to accept his authority. The latter continually protested against the religion Moses prescribed for them and doubtless would have gladly repudiated any false miracles in order to escape its onerous burden. Jesus exhibited his miracles before a people who were offended by his claim to be their messiah and who sought in every way to expose and destroy him. The apostles performed miracles before hostile pagans as well as the Jews. Yet in none of these cases do we have accounts of the miracles being disproved; in fact, despite hostility and incredulity, we find the religion for which they were the evidence making steady progress, a phenomenon which can only be attributed to the irrefutable character of the miracles. In addition, the miracles were sufficiently numerous and many were of such duration as to provide ample opportunity for investigation of their truth. The Egyptian plagues lasted several days; the passage through the Red Sea and the Jordan each took up several hours; those cured by Jesus remained available for interrogation; Jesus' resurrection appearances were numerous and extended over a forty day period. And yet, in spite of ample opportunity and sufficient motive, nothing was ever exposed as fraudulent.

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[43] For help in formulating these criticisms of Hume I am much indebted to C. D. Broad's essay, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles," Human Understanding: Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume, ed. by A. Sesonske and N. Fleming (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 86-98.

In the case of the resurrection it is true that Jesus reappeared only to his friends and that the leaders of the Jews denied the fact, but several considerations should be kept in mind. First, the disciples themselves did not expect the resurrection, but were plunged in despair and fear by thier Master's death. Their subsequent courage in the face of persecution and their confidence in the ultimate triumph of their faith are explicable only on the basis of a miraculous event. Secondly, the Jewish priests' explanation that Jesus' body had been stolen from the tomb by the apostles while the guards slept not only fails to account for the disciples' sudden zeal and the widespread acceptance of their claim by those predisposed to disbelief, but it is further undermined by the priests' failure to produce witnesses to the theft, and also their later silence concerning this charge when trying the apostles and Paul. Finally, Priestley explains why the resurrected Jesus did not appear before his enemies by saying that if he had, and they had been converted, later skeptical generations would maintain that the resurrection story was part of a scheme hatched by the rulers of the day to extend their control over the people, that these rulers had suppressed contrary evidence, and that no one with the means to do so at the time had properly investigated its truthfulness.

I have already shown why Priestley insisted upon the traditional authorship of the biblical books.[44] Such an assumption strengthened his defense of miracles by enabling him to appeal to scriptural accounts of them as the testimony of living witnesses. The fact that no one challenged either the authorship of these books or the events they record for at least several hundred years after their appearance is additional evidence that the miracles are authentic history. Moreover, the existence of customs and rites which date from the events they commemorate, such as the Passover and the Lord's Supper, confirm further the historicity of these books and the miracles they record.

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[44] _Supra_, pp. 116-23.

Additional evidence for the biblical miracles are the extraordinary historical effects which they produced, effects which require a miraculous cause to explain them. How else account for the Israelite slaves' escape from mighty Egypt, or for their adoption of a complex and demanding religion which they obviously did not like but the historical facts associated with which they could not deny? How else explain why later thousands of Jews and pagans joined a movement whose beliefs were opposed to their previous faiths and which could lead to suffering and death? The remarkable success of Christianity in the relatively short span of three hundred years, not only in changing opinions, but even more remarkable, in changing moral conduct, can only be explained on the basis of miracles.[45] To assert otherwise necessitates belief in the even greater and more incredible miracle that all the persons who accepted the miracles of Moses and Jesus at the time were so deluded by enthusiasm that they received as true what was wholly destitute of evidence. If, as Hume asserted, reasonable men must always reject the greater miracle in case of conflict, then the defender of the biblical miracles has the stronger position.[46]

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[45] Priestley developed this point in his controversy with Gibbon. See infra, pp. 178-79.

As for the character of the witnesses to biblical miracles, in addition to the fact that they were predisposed to disbelief, Priestley argued that the very fact that they were generally persons of little education increases the credibility of their testimony since the "vulgar" are the last to be convinced of anything contrary to their inherited prejudices, whereas "persons of education and curiosity are the most ready to embrace anything that is quite new . . . thinking it to be a proof of a superiority over others, and of a freedom from vulgar prejudices."[47] Moreover, we find no indication that either Moses, Jesus or the apostles ever sought to take worldly advantage of their authority. Moses would certainly never have detained Israel forty years in the wilderness if he had desired to enjoy the fruits of power.[48] Christ clearly repudiated every effort by others to see in him the conquering princely messiah expected by his people.[49] The apostles never sought to exalt themselves over one another by appealing to special miracles, and, indeed, their expectation that the end of the world was imminent is inconsistent with the assumption that they were motivated by ambition.[50] That Moses or Jesus and his followers could have been impostors or deluded fanatics is inconceivable in light of the high moral character and good sense revealed in their teachings, deeds, and writings.[51] Nor did any of them possess such education or in other respects manifest such insight (for example, Moses believed that the pharoah's magicians performed authentic miracles,[52] while Christ and the apostles believed in demons)[53] to justify the conclusion that they could have on their own devised religious systems so superior to all others in the ancient world.[54] Finally, neither Moses, Jesus, nor the apostles lived in circumstances prior to their commitment to the faith to justify risking loss of them for the sake of a fraud. They were all well along in life, Jesus being the youngest at about thirty, and all possessed just that comfortable intermediate degree of material means which excludes both the desperation born of poverty and the hunger for excessive riches.[55] What Priestley says about the apostles would apply, with exception to the reference to Christ, to Moses as well:

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[46] Up to this point my exposition of Priestley's defense of the reliability of testimony concerning miracles follows his succinct statement of it in Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XVI, 116-47. The other works mentioned supra, p. 137 , make the same points.

[47] An Outline of the Evidences of Revealed Religion [1797], XXI, 177.

[48] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 151-52.

[49] Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion, XV, 301.

> Such men as these were induced, by the evidence of what they saw and heard, in favour of the doctrines and pretensions of Christ, to act counter to the strongest prejudices to which

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[50] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 132-33.

[51] An Outline of the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XXI, 180.

[52] Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion, XV, 225-26.

[53] Ibid., p. 309.

[54] An Outline of the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XXI, 180.

[55] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 145.

> mankind can be subject; they risked every thing that was valuable to them, their ease, their honest reputation, their little fortunes, and their lives.[56]

In asnwer to Hume's point that miracles occur most frequently among primitive people, Priestley could respond by repeating the claim that it is generally the less educated who cling to past prejudices most stubbornly and who would therefore be the least predisposed to accept miracles done in behalf of contrary truths. But behind this argument was Priestley's basic assumption that men in all past ages were, as he liked to put it, "constituted as men now are," that is, they would have refused to accept the truth of any statement without sufficient evidence.[57] For example, it would be impossible at the present day, he argued, for even a thousand writers who for some reason agreed that the French had completely conquered North America in the French and Indian War to gain credence, because the tens of thousands who know the truth would refute them. Analogously, the miracles of Moses, Christ, and the apostles could never have been accepted by such large numbers in the age in which they were performed if they were fraudulent, because those predisposed to doubt them would have investigated the evidence and exposed their falsity.[58] This assumption that ancient Near Eastern man and the citizen of eighteenth century Europe shared a common mental outlook is, of course, one of the foundations of Priestley's defense of miracles from historical evidence.

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[56] *Ibid.*

[57] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part II, IV, 458.

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 477-78.

Priestley also defended the confinement of the Judaeo-Christian miracles to biblical times by saying that although miracles were necessary at the beginning to establish the truth of divine revelation, once this task was completed, which it certainly has been to the satisfaction of anyone who is willing to examine the evidence impartially, additional interruptions of nature would only occasion unnecessary inconvenience.[59]

Finally, the exact reason why God chooses one time rather than another to perform miracles is known only to Him. We can no more explain why he created the world when he did, or why he chose to delay so long to reveal Christianity and, even then, at first only to a particular group. No other advantage--good government, art, science--is universal, so we can only acknowledge that Divine Providence ordains matters in this way, and that all have their use in forming the best system conducive to the greatest good. We must be content with knowing what has actually taken place, and since the existing evidence for miracles, and thus for divine revelation, is more than sufficient for subsequent ages, there is no justification for arguing that miracles are needed in post biblical times.[60]

But what of Hume's argument that equally well-attested miracles have been wrought in behalf of contrary religious truths? Priestley's answer is that impartial investigation will show that the evidence in behalf of non-biblical miracles is never adequate. Either accounts of them were not written until long after they were said to occur, or not in the places they were said to have happened, or they were not carefully examined because they coincided with the prejudices of those to whom they were reported, or it was in the interests of those in power to favor the deceit. None were performed in the presence of unbelievers; many were intended for some evil end and many were too ridiculous to be worthy of the Supreme Being.[61]

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[59] *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, XV, 324.

[60] *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XVI, 147; *An Outline of the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XXI, 186-87.

Hume had, for example, claimed that the tale of the Emperor Vespasian curing a blind and lame man at Alexandria is "one of the best-attested miracles in all profane history."[62] Priestley's reply is succinct.

> This boasted miracle is not related by any person who was present; the oldest account we have of it, being written about thirty years after the event. It was not exhibited before enemies. Such cures as these might easily have been pretended, by persons prepared beforehand. The Heathens were very credulous with respect to things of this kind, and the report of these might be very useful to procure credit to the new emperor. There was no scrutiny into the truth of the fact at the time. Indeed, such scrutiny would have been discountenanced, and not have been very safe. And, lastly, the pretended miracles do not appear to have produced any effect. It is even almost certain that the historians [Tacitus and Suetonius] themselves did not believe them.[63]

Among the numerous accounts of "Popish" miracles, Priestley is willing to grant that the case which Hume cites, that of miracles performed at the tomb of Abbé Paris,[64] is the most credible. Yet, a closer examination of the evidence reveals that there was a strong political interest at work among the Jansenists to defend these miracles as signs of divine support for their cause; there is plenty of evidence that contemporary ecclesiastical and government investigators doubted the authenticity of the miracles and proved many false, that many witnesses and those cured later admitted lying, and that the supposedly miraculous cures were effected gradually so that medicines or simply time could have been responsible.[65]

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[61] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 191-92.

[62] Hume, "Of Miracles," Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding, p. 126.

[63] Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XVI, 146.

The fact that a large number of false miracles have gained credit since the time of Christ and the apostles is itself an evidence to the truth of those earlier ones. Men are easily led by analogy from one thing to another so that once having been compelled to admit the evidence for some miracles, it is understandable that they would more easily admit others wrought for similar purposes on much less evidence.[66] Thus, Priestley can turn the demonstrated credulity of later Christians into another evidence for the historicity of the biblical miracles.

One can make no claim that Priestley originated any of these various arguments in defense of miracle-testimony. The basic approach harks back to Leslie's Short and Easy Method and the same points were made in other replies to Hume which preceded Priestley's. Among the most notable were William Adams' *Essay on Mr. Hume's Essay on Miracles* (1752), John Douglas' *Criterion* (1755), and George Campbell's *A Dissertation on Miracles* (1763).[67] Priestley never indicates where he first discovered these arguments, but such information would be of no great significance because they were so common at the time. As he himself observes in the preface to the *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*:

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[64] Hume, "Of Miracles," Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding, pp. 127-30.

[65] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 194-95.

[66] Ibid., p. 191.

> They [the evidences for revelation] were by no means originally collected by myself. The far greater part of them have been frequently quoted, and their accuracy never disputed. I had little to do besides collecting, arranging, and applying them, in a manner somewhat more adapted to my present purpose.[68]

The important question is whether or not this kind of defense succeeds against Hume's claim that, in fact, there never has been adequate testimony--or historical evidence--to warrant belief in the biblical, or any other, miracles. C. D. Broad, while maintaining that Hume does not satisfactorily prove that absolutely no amount of testimony can make us accept a miracle, nevertheless concludes that "all Hume's arguments to show that the testimony that is actually offered for any particular alleged miracle is untrustworthy seem to me to be sound and important."[69] Modern men are less inclined than their eighteenth century forefathers to attribute false testimony to conscious deception, or "a cheat,"[70] but, on the basis of a much greater knowledge of human psychology, they are willing to allow far more for honest self-deception than was done even in Hume's day.[71]

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[67] All cited by Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 336-43.

[68] *Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, XVI, 6.

[69] Broad, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

Broad takes the case of the central Christian miracles, the Resurrection, and argues that the direct testimony to its truth, eyewitness reports, is very feeble, especially when compared to cases in which even stronger direct testimony turned out to be untrue, as in the case of the widespread report, current in 1914 among the most earnest people, that 80,000 Russians had just passed through England. The strongest testimony to the Resurrection is indirect, that is, the kind of statement that one has observed an event Y which cannot be explained except by the occurrence of event X. The disciples were in despair at the time of the Crucifixion, yet this despair gave way to an unshakable confidence that their Master had risen from the dead. Such a change in attitude is not at all improbable so that there is little ground for doubting the testimony to its truth, but how else, as Priestley and others went on to argue, can one account for this change except to say that Christ actually did rise from the dead? Broad admits that no one has ever offered a better explanation, but, on the other hand, the miraculous explanation has the least intrinsic probability. Moreover, the failure up to now of alternative explanations does not leave us only the miraculous one, but "an indefinite number of other explanations which our lack of all detailed knowledge of the events immediately following the Crucifixion prevents us from formulating." Our degree of ignorance is such that it easily permits the possibility of some quite simple explanation, and also that no one will ever discover it.[72]

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[70] Hume, "Of Miracles," Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding, p. 134.

[71] Broad, op. cit., p. 90.

Leslie Stephen shares Broad's opinion that no one has successfully refuted Hume's criticisms of the existing testimony for miracles. In his History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century he surveys the period's various replies to Hume's essay which appealed to historical evidence, and argues that basic weaknesses render them unconvincing.

First of all, there is the general consideration that eighteenth century apologists like Priestley who devoted most of their efforts to answering in detail every single objection presented overlooked the fact that a purely defensive line of argument may only lead the reader to speculate that "where so much requires to be explained away, there must be something which cannot really be explained away."[73] Careful point by point refutations of Hume's criticisms no doubt diluted the force of his attack, but to give only complex verbal justifications for strange events long past without offering any immediate positive corroboration from the present was bound to have a very limited effect.

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[72] Ibid., p. 91-92.

[73] Stephen, op. cit., I, 197.

Priestley and others sought to defend this limitation of miracles to biblical times by showing that no adequate historical evidence exists for later ones; however, as Stephen points out, to prove that more recent miracle stories have no factual basis raises a strong presumption against the validity of the earlier biblical miracles which were performed in circumstances and rest "upon evidence far less favourable to detection."[74]

The answer of those who appealed to historical evidence was that the books of the Bible were written by their traditional authors, who were either witnesses to, or at least contemporary with, the events they described. The chief evidence for this claim was the lack of any challenge at the time, or for a long while thereafter, either to the traditional authorship or to the events reported.

Modern biblical criticism has rendered such a position on biblical authorship completely untenable, but Stephen points out that the apologists' reasoning also involved an unwarranted shift of the burden of proof from those who asserted an alleged truth to those who denied it.[75] In this case the alleged truth was the intrinsically improbable one that certain facts originated in a way completely contrary to the general current of human history, that is, supernaturally. In defending this claim by appealing to the absence of contemporary objections, Priestley and other historically minded apologists violated a fundamental canon of historical criticism, that one must remain in doubt where the evidence is insufficient. Instead, they assumed that the absence of negative proof, that is contemporary refutations, amounted to a convincing positive argument.

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[74] Ibid., p. 342.

[75] Ibid., pp. 159, 167, 342.

Basic disagreement about the validity of natural theology, as Sir Leslie emphasizes, further complicated the controversy.[76] Apologists argued that miracles are antecedently probably because nature provides good grounds for believing in an omnipotent and benevolent God who would wish to inform us of our duty and destiny, and who therefore could and would employ striking interruptions of nature's course to call attention to and authenticate his communications. On the other hand, Hume's denial of miracles' evidential value was based upon his further denial that nature provides evidence for belief in any such God. His most famous attack on natural theology was the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, but he also criticized it in the essay "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State" which immediately follows the essay on miracles in the Inquiry.[77] In both pieces he argued that the evidences from nature are insufficient to prove the existence of the Grand Designer, perfectly good, perfectly wise, and perfectly powerful, who, according to the apologists, makes miracles antecedently probable.

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[76] *Ibid.*, pp. 287, 337, 343, 352.

[77] Hume, "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State," *Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding*, pp. 137-49.

As we have shown, Priestley used natural theology to argue for the antecedent probability of miracles,[78] but, as we have also shown, he was aware of natural theology's limitations.[79] The result was that he placed the greatest emphasis upon the historical evidence that miracles had actually happened. It is here that the thorniest problem of evaluation arises, because neither Hume nor his opponents, including Priestley, possessed what was generally lacking until the nineteenth century--a genuinely historical sense--what Stephen calls a "distinct realisation of . . . the slow development of complex social forms and of phases of human thought,"[80] or, putting it another way, "a vivid realisation of the extinct social phases."[81] They lacked, in other words, an awareness that past ages are genuinely different from one another, that not only men's institutions but their mental outlooks undergo change and development.

The latter part of the eighteenth century witnessed, as we have mentioned, an increased appreciation for the value of history as a source of moral, religious, and philosophical knowledge.[82] But this attitude toward history as something to be pursued for purposes extrinsic to itself led those who appealed to history's authority to neglect that which later researchers came to see as essential to achieving a real understanding of the past--participation through imagination and sympathy in the viewpoints of persons living in an intellectual milieu different from one's own. Instead, their tendency was to view human nature statically, to assume that men of former times shared the "reasonable" attitude of enlightened eighteenth century citizens.

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[78] *Supra*, pp. 133-34.

[79] *Supra*, pp. 71-80.

[80] Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 320.

[81] *Ibid.*, p. 321.

[82] *Supra*, pp. 124-31.

This assumption was held by both sides in the miracle controversy with the result that the only alternative to granting actual supernatural interference was to attribute the stories to imposture. Either, as Priestley maintained, the available testimony to miracles is that of honest men who had ample opportunity for investigation, or, as Hume argued, it was another product of those "common phenomena . . . the knavery and folly of men."[83]

It is true that in his essay Hume spoke of man's tendency to self-deception, which he attributed to his appetite for the marvelous.[84] It is also true that in the Natural History of Religion (1757) he argued that polytheism originated from primitive man's ignorance of nature and that monotheism developed only gradually as civilization progressed; nevertheless, it is clear from "Of Miracles" that he felt that "design to deceive others"[85] and not a particular world view was the chief explanation for the testimony to miracles.

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[83] Hume, "Of Miracles," Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding, p. 134.

[84] Ibid., pp. 121-22.

[85] Ibid., p. 121.

One of Priestley's principal contributions to religious thought was, as we shall see, the demonstration that doctrines are not immediately revealed in their totality but undergo development in response to cultural changes,[86] and yet he too failed to bring this awareness of change in man's mental outlook to bear on the debate over miracles.

Neither side in the controversy was willing to entertain seriously the possibility that the explanation for the miracle stories was neither fraud nor "ample evidence," but a world view radically different from that of the eighteenth century. They were unable to entertain such a possibility because they lacked a genuine historical sense. Broad suggests that advances in psychological understanding have increased our appreciation for the possibilities of honest self-deception, but it can be argued that with regard to evaluating historical evidence the most significant intellectual advance has been our increased awareness that men of other cultures and times may think in ways quite different from our own. Or, in other words, what Broad speaks of as honest self-deception may be more appropriately called the presuppositions of a particular era. Stephen makes the same point in evaluating the controversy over miracles by dwelling on the failure of Hume's eighteenth century antagonists to see that "the general intellectual condition of the age," which was characterized by widespread belief in miracles among all religious groups, may have been the true source of the testimony concerning them.[87] Even Conyers Middleton, who used this very argument against the credibility of post biblical miracles in _A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are Supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church_ (1749), refused to apply it to biblical times.[88]

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[86] *Infra*, pp. 217-20.

But while one can argue as Stephen and, indirectly, Broad do that modern man's strengthened historical sense inclines him to agree with Hume's low evaluation of the actual testimony to miracles; nevertheless, one of the most recent studies of the problem, Alan Richardson's _History Sacred and Profane_,[89] tends to support the apologists who, like Priestley, appealed to historical evidence. Richardson readily admits that one's own time affects one's point of view, but he goes on to point out that this condition affects eighteenth and twentieth as well as first century man. In particular it affects the historian attempting to arrive at a true description of the past.

> What the historian can never detach himself from is the "climate of opinion" [a phrase borrowed from Carl Becker] of his own day; it is because of this that he notices certain "facts" and ignores others; what he does with his evidence is determined by his belonging to a particular age and place; his interpretation of history and his view of what are and what are not "facts" is conditioned by the dominant ideas of the age in which he lives.[90]

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[87] Stephen, _op. cit._, I, 225.

[88] _Ibid._, p. 226.

[89] A. Richardson, _History Sacred and Profane_ (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964).

[90] _Ibid._, p. 193.

Because the historian is always influenced by the presuppositions of his time he will not only require that there be credible testimony by witnesses before he accepts the historicity of an event, but the attested event must "accord with the historian's own deepest understanding and experience of life," which themselves are, in large measure, the products of his time.[91] These two conditions cannot really be separated because how credible the testimony will appear will depend upon how well that to which it testifies accords with the historian's attitude toward life's nature and meaning.

Richardson focusses, as did the eighteenth century apologists, upon the historical evidence for the miracle of the Resurrection.[92] Modern biblical scholarship has shown convincingly that we do not possess any eyewitness accounts of it. Nor, except for Paul, do we have the personal statements of any of the witnesses who were believed by their contemporaries to have seen the risen Jesus. As a result the precritical appeals to the apostolic authorship of the resurrection narratives are valueless.

The primary historical evidence for the Resurrection is the remarkable rise and expansion of a movement, the Christian Church, which was based upon this very belief. An explanation must be given for the origin and power of this faith. As has been said, scholars generally agree that we do not possess any personal testimony, save that of Paul's, to the Resurrection, but it is also true that the overwhelming majority of biblical scholars agree that much of the New Testament material dates from the period in which the events took place that inspired this faith, and that this material represents accurately the mind and teaching of those who witnessed these events. All the New Testament writers who recorded the testimony of the original witnesses agree that their central conviction and that of the earliest Christian communities was that Jesus had risen from the dead. Faith in Christ did not mean primarily adherence to his teachings, but the belief that he was the Risen Lord.

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[91] Ibid., p. 195.

[92] Ibid., pp. 195-212.

Richardson argues that the conclusion most consistent with this evidence is that "the resurrection of Christ, historically speaking, created the Church by calling faith into being."[93] The objection that according to the evidence the risen Christ appeared only to his supporters and not to unbiased outsiders does not hold because the New Testament makes clear that he appeared to men plunged in despair, or, in Priestley words, without a predisposition to believe. The hypothesis that the Easter message was deliberately fraudulent, the result of an apostolic conspiracy, cannot, and generally is not any longer, seriously entertained, primarily because of what eighteenth century apologists called "internal evidence"; that is, it would be, in Hume's terms, an even greater miracle that a movement advocating peace, charity, and devotion to a holy God could have originated in a fraudulent conspiracy.

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[93] *Ibid*., p. 200.

The most popular contemporary alternative line of explanation for the early Christian faith is that the New Testament writers were sincere but mistaken in their interpretation of the factual basis for their belief. The variations on this line are legion,[94] but all share the same weakness: they contradict the explanation for Christian beginnings offered by the sources themselves which unanimously attribute the disciples' faith to Christ's resurrection. This apparently unobjective reaction to the actual data corroborates, Richardson believes, what he has already pointed out, that whether or not an historian accepts the validity of the available testimony to an event depends ultimately upon whether or not the attested event accords with his presuppositions. Men reject the testimony for the Resurrection, and for other miracles, not because the evidence is of itself insufficient, but because such occurrences are irreconcilable with their understanding of life.

Richardson emphasizes that this same attitude marked Hume and Enlightenment historians generally.[95] While working on the first volume of his _History of England_ (1756), Hume remarked, "I may be liable to the reproach of ignorance, but I am certain to escape that of partiality."[96] Yet, as Carl Becker has said, his _History_ is plainly a narrative of events constructed so as

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[94] Richardson, _op. cit._, mentions the views of Arthur Drews, the _religionsgeschichtiche Schule_, the Ritschlians, Brunner, Barth, and Bultman, pp. 206-10.

[95] Ibid., pp. 90-103

[96] Quoted by _ibid._, p. 100.

> to apply to them the ready-made judgements of the age of reason . . . namely, that except for the ambition of princes and politicians, the worldly interests and intrigues of priests, the emotional excesses of fanatics, and the fears of a superstitious and degraded populace . . . the history of England might have been what the history of any people ought to be.[97]

Enlightenment thinkers spoke of history as a source for moral and intellectual guidance, but what they actually did was to use selected data from the past to confirm their own preconceptions of virtue and wisdom.

It should be added that defenders of the faith were no less guilty of this practice than skeptics. Priestley believed that his own presentation of Christianity was based upon historical evidence sufficient to convince any open-minded man,[98] and he proclaimed his willingness always to abide by new evidence,[99] but it is obvious, for example, that in his effort to distinguish true from corrupt doctrines he tended to allow personal bias to affect his evaluation of the data.[100]

Richardson's conclusion is that what finally determines how an historian evaluates the data concerning miracles is the same as that which finally determines all his historical judgments, that is, quoting Becker, his "settled convictions as to the nature of man and the world," or, also to use Becker's term, his "faith."[101] The decisive reason for Hume's rejection of miracles was not the inadequacy of testimony for them, but that they did not fit his assumptions about the nature of the universe. It could be said that the decisive reason for Priestley's acceptance of that testimony was also not its adequacy but his prior assent to the religion it alleged to substantiate. In Hume's case the "climate of opinion" which shaped his faith was exclusively that of the Age of Reason, whereas Priestley, on this issue, was guided by the climate of opinion of the Christian community.

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[97] Becker, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-10.

[98] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XIV, 6.

[99] *Letters to Dr. Horsley* [1783], XVIII, 41.

[100] See, for example, his arguments for a Unitarian Christology in the New Testament, *infra*, pp. 197-202.

It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in a comprehensive evaluation of the myriad approaches to the complex issues raised here--miracles, the Resurrection, the basis of the Christian religion, the nature of historical work--but Richardson's treatment is relevant because it indicates that a line of argument similar to Priestley's on the problem of miracles is still under serious discussion. It suggests that Priestley may do more justice to the historical evidence than skeptics like Hume or Stephen or Broad.

Nevertheless, even Richardson's defense of the historical evidence for miracles includes the acknowledgment that miracles cannot serve as the basis for faith,[102] or, in eighteenth century terms, as a proof for revelation. Rather, it is one's faith which ultimately determines whether or not one accepts evidence for the miraculous. Hume himself saw that this was the significant effect of his essay, for toward its conclusion he writes:

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[101] Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-04. He takes the Becker quotations from Charlotte Watkins Smith, *Carl Becker: on History and the Climate of Opinion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956).

[102] *Ibid.*, p. 208.

> I beg the limitation here made may be remarked, when I say that a miracle can never be proved so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I own that otherwise there may possibly be miracles or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony, though perhaps it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history.[103]

Today, it would seem necessary to agree that miracles can no longer serve as the "foundation of a system of religion," but whether Hume's other assertion that no adequate testimony for miracles actually exists remains open for discussion.

2. Prophecy

The eighteenth century's most notorious critic of prophecy's evidential value was Anthony Collins, whose two books on the subject, *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) and *The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered* (1726), offered detailed evidence for the lack of literal correspondence between the biblical prophecies and the events alleged to be their fulfillment. Collins argued with tongue obviously in cheek that the only alternative to surrendering this cornerstone of Christian belief was to interpret the prophecies allegorically.

The replies to Collins were numerous and employed various methods of defense.[104] What all shared was the same ignorance of historical fact and the same lack of an historical sense which marked the controversy over miracles. Priestley, however, had an advantage over more orthodox apologists because he did not feel compelled to defend, as we have shown,[105] the infallibility of the biblical writers. In the preface which he wrote for the republication of Collins' _A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty_ (1715),[106] Priestley referred to this advantage and suggested that many of the discrepancies pointed out by Collins between Old Testament prophecies and New Testament claims to their fulfillment will no longer trouble us if we admit that Jesus and the apostles, while always truthfully reporting the facts they observed, were susceptible to mistaken interpretations of those facts.

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[103] Hume, "Of Miracles," *Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding*, p. 133.

[104] Stephen, *op. cit.*, I, 183-92.

> If we admit that they had no particular instruction from above in the interpretation of _Scripture_ . . . and that, with the prejudices common to all Jews of that age, they were led to suppose more passages in their Scriptures to relate to the Messiah than really did so, we may make ourselves perfectly easy on the subject; because the _testimony_ of the apostles to the leading facts in the gospel history . . . on the truth of which alone our belief of Christianity properly rests, stands unimpeached by any instances of their mistakes in point of judgment.[107]

Priestley even doubted that Collins was an unbeliever. After all, Mr. Locke had been his friend and admirer, his moral character was irreproachable, and he had been an excellent magistrate.

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[105] _Supra_, pp. 97 ff.

[106] _Republished with a Preface by Joseph Priestley_ [1790], IV, 255-310.

[107] _Ibid._, p. 261. For specific examples of what Priestley considered to be erroneous interpretations of prophecy by the biblical writers see _supra_, pp. 101-03, 111.

He had seen "in a strong light the absurdity of the established system," and the attacks upon him by the orthodox clergy for the freedom of his views could well have goaded him to throw in their way every possible difficulty.[108] Priestley's high opinion of Collins' treatment of the doctrine of necessity no doubt contributed to this sympathetic view.[109]

Priestley was willing to concede that the correspondence between a prophecy and its fulfillment might not appear to be exact, but he firmly rejected any suggestion to solve the difficulty by appealing to a "spiritual accomplishment," as Collins had proposed. By such a mode of interpretation, "any event might be said to be the fulfillment of any prophecy whatever."[110] It was, he felt, sufficiently convincing to show that the degree of literal correspondence was too great to be attributed to human foresight and that the fulfilling events could not have been produced by the exertions of those with a vested interest in confirming the prophecies.[111]

Many apparent discrepancies are the result of inadequate interpretation. For example, whole numbers are generally used in prophecy, and since these can only point to the approximate date of fulfillment, one should not expect chronological precision.[112] Allowance should also be made for the effect of metaphorical consistency. In the case of the prophecy that employs the image of a man and equates his toes with various kingdoms (Daniel 2:31 ff.), it does not mean that those kingdoms must be exactly ten in number.[113] Moreover, many of the happenings forecast by Scripture require a long time from the beginning to the completion of them; therefore predictions which now appear to be only partially fulfilled will eventually be authenticated when fully accomplished. This is notably the case with the eschatological predictions in the latter part of Daniel and in Revelation.[114] Finally, many misinterpretations arise from the obscurity of the prophetic language. God intended this obscurity because he wished to show skeptics that the ignorance of those to whom he committed his revelations of the future prevented them from contriving their fulfillment. And yet, the language is sufficiently clear so that when the predicted events occur, one can "be satisfied that only He who can see the end from the beginning, could have described them in that obscure manner so long beforehand."[115]

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[108] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 257.

[110] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XII, 449.

[111] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 170.

To the charge by Collins that the clear knowledge of events up to a certain age and no farther displayed in a book like Daniel only proved that the author lived in that age,[116] Priestley replied with his familiar arguments from the absence of contemporary charges of fraud and from internal marks of integrity. In the case of Daniel, for example, no one raised a question about the book's authenticity until Porphyry in the third century after Christ. Surely the Jews would never have admitted a forgery into their sacred canon, nor would they have been easily persuaded to accept a book which, like the other prophetic works of the Old Testament, contains severe criticisms of the Jews themselves. The profound piety and high moral tone of the book are utterly inconsistent with a conscious imposition.

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[112] _Notes on all the Books of Scripture_, XII, 305.

[113] _Ibid._, p. 306.

[114] _Ibid._, pp. 306-07. See _infra_, pp. 171-75.

[115] _A Continuation of the Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France_, XXI, 166.

Biblical prophecies, Priestley believed, forecast accurately biblical events, and also the future of contemporary Europe and of all mankind.

He notes among the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled within the biblical time span: Moses' prediction of Israel's conquest of Canaan, her subsequent apostacy, and her consequent exile and dispersion (Deut. 28-31);[117] Ezekiel's anticipation of the conquest of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar (29:1-9); Isaiah's and Jeremiah's foretelling of the fall of Babylonia to the Medes and Persians (Isa. 13:19-22; 21:2; Jer. 50, 51: 11); Jeremiah's prediction of Israel's seventy years in captivity (29:10); Isaiah's specific mention of Cyrus as conqueror of Babylon and as Israel's deliverer (44:28-45:7), and his description of the destruction of Tyre

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[116] The Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered, p. 151.

[117] Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion, XV, 281-86.

(26:1-5); Daniel's announcement in symbolic terms of the three empires which would succeed the Babylonian--the Persian, Macedonian, and Roman--and of the appearance under this fourth empire of the Messiah (7:1-14). In the New Testament he points to Christ's prediction of his own betrayal and death, his resurrection, the persecution of his followers, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (e.g., Mark 13, 14).[118]

As for the messianic prophecies, Priestley argues that they do not all refer to one person, but that some apply to a future temporal prince of the family line of David and others to Jesus.[119] The former, "the subject of numberless clear prophecies from Amos to Zechariah,"[120] will be an upright prince, endued with the spirit of God, who will preside over the nation of Israel upon its second and final return to Palestine, and under whom the nation will enjoy peace, prosperity, and dominion over neighboring kingdoms. It is probable that there will not be merely one prince, but a succession of them in the Davidic line. Such prophecies as Amos 9:8-15; Isaiah 11, 12, 32, 42, 49, 55, 66; Hosea 1:10, 11; 3:4, 5; Micah 2:12, 13; 5:2-5; Jeremiah 23:5-8; 30:8, 9; 33:11-18; Ezekial 24:22-31; 37:21-28; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12, 13 all speak of this future glory for Israel under Davidic rulership. Certain prophecies, however, seem to fit only Jesus. The most notable of these is the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 with its explicit reference to the Servant's death and subsequent glorification. Daniel 7:13, 14 describes the future ruler of a kingdom which is not of this world, but which is given to him by God and over which he is to rule forever. The ninth chapter predicts that seventy weeks ("probably meaning as many years as there are days in that period")[121] after the commandment to rebuild the Temple, a person who bears the title "Messiah" will be "cut off," after which the Temple and people will be destroyed. Both these prophecies also appear to refer to Christ. So too does Zechariah 12, 13, which speaks of the future sorrow of the Jews over one whom they have "pierced," perhaps a forecast of their future conversion to Christianity.

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[118] _Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion_, XVI, 157-65.

[119] "Observations on the Prophecies relating to the Messiah, and the future Glory of the House of David," XII, 411-42.

[120] _Ibid._, p. 412.

Priestley's purpose here is clearly to strengthen the evidential value of prophecy by reducing the number of prophecies which the life of Christ must be made to fulfill. It is obvious that the messianic passages which associate temporal triumph with the Messiah's appearance have not yet been verified by history; but, rather than allegorize them in order to make them correspond with the life of Jesus, Priestley applies them to another person and to other events yet to come. This leaves only those passages which refer to a suffering and dying servant of God whose kingdom is not of this world, passages which the Christian apologist can claim find literal fulfillment in Christ. Priestley readily admits that the New Testament authors sometimes mistakenly apply prophecies regarding the future temporal ruler of the Jews to Christ,[122] as, for example, Matthew does in applying Isaiah 42 to Christ (12:17 ff.) and as Paul does in relating Isaiah 49 to him (II Cor. 6:2). The essential point, as already noted, is that such errors in Old Testament interpretation in no way impugn the reliability of these writers' testimony to the facts they themselves observed.[123]

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[121] Ibid., p. 431.

The final return of the Jews to Palestine under a Davidic prince and their conversion to Christianity are not the only events beyond biblical times which Priestley found foretold in Scripture. Christ predicted the corruption of his teachings in Matthew 24 and Mark 13,[124] and many passages describe the rise of papal power. Priestley believed that the evidence for Scripture's anticipating the latter was particularly strong because so many different sacred authors speak in similar terms. Daniel 7 speaks of the tenth horn of the fourth beast (Rome) which is to become a sovereign power, and Daniel 11:36 refers to this power as doing "according to his will" and exalting himself above every god. Revelation 17 describes a woman arrayed in purple and scarlet who is identified as "that great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth." Paul, in II Thessalonians, forewarns against the rise of a power in the church which will claim to be God, will pretend to miracles, and, according to I Timothy 4, will urge celibacy and abstinence from certain foods. All these, Priestley argues, refer to the Papacy.[125]

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[122] Ibid., p. 441.

[123] Supra, p. 165. For additional examples of the erroneous interpretation of Old Testament prophecy by New Testament writers see supra, pp. 102-03, 111.

[124] Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XVI, 165.

The contemporary rise of infidelity was also, he asserts, anticipated by prophecy. Christ gave an intimation of it when he asked, "When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8), and the apostles Peter and Jude announced it in their epistles (II Peter 3:3, 4; Jude 18).[126]

But the corruption of Christian doctrine, the rise of papal power, and the increase in infidelity are only the painful prelude to a glorious future also foretold by Scripture. Christ predicted repeatedly with the greatest confidence the final and universal triumph of his religion, as when he said, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18); and, indeed, he declared that the growth of infidelity was itself a sign that his ultimate triumph was imminent (Matt 24, Mark 13). Moreover, the power of the Pope, whose destruction is described in Daniel (7:9-11, 25-27; 11:35, 36), II Thesalonians 2:8, and Revelation 11, 17, 18, is rapidly declining, as evidenced by the Reformation, the abolition of the Jesuits (1773), the reduction of the power of the Inquisition, and (Priestley could say in 1797) the loss of France.[127] In addition, according to

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[125] Ibid., pp. 395-418.

[126] Ibid., pp. 412-14.

[127] Discourses Relating to the Evidences of Revealed Religion, XVI, 414-18.

Daniel 11:40-12:1, which describes the rise and fall of "the king of the north," the Turkish Empire will eventually fall, thereby making possible the return of the Jews to Palestine.[128]

These mighty events--the fall of Rome and the Turks, the restoration of the Jews, and the triumph of a purified Christianity--will reach a climax with the second coming of Christ. He will, as he predicted, return visibly in the clouds (Matt 26:64) to establish the millennium, which may last far longer than a thousand earthly years (Rev. 20:6). The establishment of the millennium, which will see the resurrection of the faithful and the triumph of justice and truth, is to be preceded by tumults and wars which will end in the destruction of civil and ecclesiastical tyranny (Daniel 12:1). Priestley felt that perhaps the revolutions in France and America were the beginning of these prophesied upheavals, and appealed to Hartley's remark that great

> temporal evils and wars will probably fall upon the nominal Christian states of these western parts, the Christian _Babylon_, before the great revolution predicted in the Scriptures; before the kingdoms of this world became the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.[129]

Hartley had gone on to warn,

> It would be great rashness to fix a time for the breaking of the storm that hangs over our heads; as it is blindness and infatuation not to see it, not to be aware that it may break . . . . Let no one deceive himself, or others. The present circumstances of the world are extraordinary and critical, beyond what has ever yet happened.[130]

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[128] _Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion_, II, 369-70; _Fast Sermon for 1793_ 1793 , XV, 513-15.

[129] Hartley, _op. cit._, II, 440.

[130] _Ibid._, p. 455.

Priestley, writing in 1793, inquires, "If they were so when he wrote [1749], how much more are they so now?"[131]

At the end of the millennium Christ will surrender his kingdom to God and there shall be a general resurrection (I Cor. 15:21-28) and final judgment of all men. At the time he published the first volume of the Institutes (1772) Priestley believed that the ultimate fate of the wicked was annihilation,[132] but by the time he lectured at the Universalist Church at Philadelphia in 1796, he conceded that the "final happiness of all the human race" is most consistent with divine justice, although there is no clear scriptural support for it. "All the crimes of finite creatures, being of course finite, cannot in equity deserve infinite punishment," and it would be inconsistent with divine benevolence for God to annihilate those who, by "judicious treatment," could surely be cured of their vices and attain the lasting bliss for which they were created. "Is an earthly parent, who is deserving of the name, incapable of wholly abandoning any of his children; and will God . . . whose love and compassion far exceed ours, abandon any of his?"

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[131] Fast Sermon for 1793, XV, 514. Millennial thought was widespread among English Dissenters, as among others, in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Anthony Lincoln points this out, op cit., pp. 49-53, and quotes as representative a dissenting attorney's reply to Edmund Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution: "I, of course, live in the hope of better things; a millennium (not a fifth monarchy, Sir, of enthusiasts and fanatics), but a new heaven and a new earth in which dwelleth righteousness; or, to drop the eastern figure and use a more philosophic language, a state of equal liberty and equal justice for all men" (p. 3).

[132] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 64; supra, pp.

The most likely prospect is that following the resurrection the wicked shall undergo a "course of discipline" designed to make them worthy of eternal happiness.[133]

After the general resurrection death will be no more, the earth shall be renewed and improved, though in ways not known, and there shall be "abundant reward for our perseverance in well-doing" (Rev. 21:1-4).[134]

Priestley's interest in prophecy increased as he grew older. He included a brief treatment of it as evidence for revelation in the *Institutes*,[135] but it was only after the outbreak of the French Revolution and the destruction of his home in the Birmingham Riots of 1791 that the subject became a central concern. One of the last sermons he delivered before leaving England for America bears the title "The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies."[136] In it he dwelt upon the possibility that Europe's present turmoil was the precursor to Christ's return and the mighty events associated with it: the fall of the papacy, the restoration of the Jews, and the triumph of pure Christianity. His letters from America written to English friends during the last ten years of his life are filled with references to his study of prophecy and his suggestions of how contemporary events may be leading to their fulfillment.[137] However, in a rather pathetic letter to Theophilus Lindsey he confesses that being alone and without opportunity to confer with knowledgeable friends his speculations concerning prophecy "may lead me astray, farther than I can be aware of myself."[138]

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[133] *Unitarianism Explained and Defended in a Discourse Delivered in the Church of the Universalists, at Philadelphia, 1796* [1796], XVI, 487-89.

[134] *Notes on all the Books of Scripture*, XIV, 510.

[135] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 364-71.

[136] *The Present State of Europe*, XV, 519-52.

The whole argument over the evidential value of prophecy is of little relevance to apologetics today, because, aside from their lack of modern biblical criticism's historical and literary insights, participants on both sides of the debate entirely misunderstood the true nature of biblical prophetic and apocalyptic literature. The intention of the authors of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Revelation, and the rest was not to reveal, like some crystal ball gazer, future events hidden from the eyes of ordinary men, but to provide their hearers with insights into the meaning of the present, and to assure them, sometimes by means of symbols and visions, of God's undefeated sovereignty over history.

But Priestley's treatment of the prophetic literature does show how the political and social upheavals which marked the end of the eighteenth century swelled his hope that the long process of man's religious, intellectual, moral, and political development was nearing completion. Always optimistic,[139] the rush of events following the successful conclusion of the American Revolution and the outbreak of the revolution in France encouraged him to turn to prophecy for assurance that fulfillment of his own hopes was near. It is significant that in defending the French Revolution against Edmund Burke, Priestley argued that it was ushering in "a totally new, a most wonderful and important aera in the history of mankind . . . distinctly and repeatedly foretold in many prophecies, delivered more than two thousand years ago."[140]

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[137] _Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley_ in _Life and Correspondence 1787-1804_, I, Part II, 284-455 _passim._

[138] _Ibid._, p. 404. To T. Lindsey (Northumberland, June 16, 1798).

[139] See _infra_, Part III, chapter 2, especially pp. 238-39, for a discussion of the philosophical basis for this optimism.

3. The Rise of Christianity

In defending the historicity of the New Testament miracles Priestley argued that only supernatural intervention can account for Christianity, which began as the faith of a remote and persecuted few, becoming the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.[141] The principal challenge to this view was offered by Edward Gibbon in the celebrated fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[142] Although briefly acknowledging that "an obvious but satisfactory answer" to Christianity's remarkable rise is "the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and . . . the ruling providence of its great Author," Gibbon went on to emphasize what he called "the secondary causes" involved. These were "the inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal" of the early Christians, which they derived from the Jews; their belief in a future life; the miraculous powers ascribed to them; their "pure and austere morals"; and their disciplined organization.[143]

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[140] *Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, XXII, 236, 244. See also *infra*, pp. 276-78.

[141] *Supra*, pp. 143-44.

[142] These two chapters first appeared in 1776.

Priestley discerned in Gibbon's ironic tone and concentration upon the "secondary causes" for the church's growth a thinly disguised attack upon the divine authority of Christianity,[144] and particularly upon the claim that only supernatural causes can account for its spread. However, as deeply as he disagreed with Gibbon's conclusions, Priestley welcomed the challenge because he felt that Gibbon, by appealing to historical evidence, was raising the decisive issue. He wrote in later years:

> I considered Mr. Gibbon as better qualified to discuss the evidences of Christianity than any other believer in this country, and probably in any other; and his plan of attack being on the ground of *history* and *human nature*, was the fairest of any.[145]

Priestley launched his counterattack at the conclusion of *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*.[146] Gibbon's essential error, he argued, was that he mistook for causes of Christianity's spread what were, in fact, effects of the original revelation. To provide no more explanation for the zeal, discipline, and confidence in a future life which inspired the early church than a six word reference to the "convincing evidence of the doctrine itself" is, as he put it in Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, to suppose "with the Indians, that the world is supported by an elephant, and the elephant by a tortoise, but the tortoise by nothing."[147] Only a revelation accompanied by incontestable evidence, notably miracles, is sufficient to explain Christianity's rapid and widespread acceptance in the face of ridicule, reproach, and persecution.

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[143] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. by J. B. Bury (3rd ed.; London: Methuen and Co., 1901), II, 2.

[144] Of course, Priestley was not the only one to see this. For a description of the various contemporary criticisms of Gibbon see Shelby T. McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity and the Discussions That It Has Provoked* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

[145] *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, XV, 197. In the light of Priestley's criticisms of Gibbon, "fairest" does not seem to be the proper word, unless it is meant in the sense of raising the right questions.

[146] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 480-94.

He also noted that while Gibbon implied that Christianity was accepted on insufficient evidence by pointing to the widespread desire in the pagan world for a religion to replace the discredited traditional mythology;[148] on the other hand, when attempting to justify persecution of the Christians, Gibbon emphasized the hatred of pagans for any religion that challenged this mythology.[149] Such a contradiction, Priestley maintained, indicated Gibbon's willingness to sacrifice logical consistency for the sake of disparaging Christianity.

Of course, Priestley did not fail to "admonish Mr. Gibbon, that he should have distinguished better than he has done between Christianity itself, and the corruptions of it." One would not expect serious believers devoted to such tenets as the Trinity and the penal theory of the atonement to do justice to the New Testament evidence, "but this allowance cannot be made for so cool and philosophical a spectator as Mr. Gibbon."[150]

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[147] Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II, IV, 536.

[148] Gibbon, Decline and Fall, pp. 55, 56.

[149] Ibid., p. 72.

Priestley concluded his critique by challenging Gibbon to debate publicly the historical evidences for Christianity's supernatural origin, but Gibbon caustically replied by letter that he would not "descend into the amphitheatre" to debate "the credibility of miracles" which is "a trite and antient [sic] topic of controversy." He denied intending to undermine Christianity, and claimed that, in contrast to one who denied the immortality of the soul, the inspiration of the biblical writers, and all traditional Christian doctrine, he had himself "delivered a simple narrative of authentic facts." He closed by reminding Priestley of the fate of another scientist turned Unitarian, Servetus, whose "theological writings are lost in oblivion; and if his book on the trinity be still preserved, it is only because it contains the first rudiments of the discovery of the circulation of the blood." Priestley, he suggested, should confine his talents and attention "to those sciences in which real and useful improvements _can_ be made."[151]

But Priestley renewed his challenge in the second part of _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_ in 1787. This time he focused on the sixteenth chapter which describes the relationship between the Roman State and the church up to the reign of Constantine, and in which, Priestley charged, Gibbon "never fails to mention or suppress everything that could make the former appear to advantage, and the latter to disadvantage."[152] Gibbon quotes Origen to the effect that the number of martyrs was inconsiderable,[153] but Priestley argues that Origen meant that the number was few compared to the total number of Christians, so that "many hundreds, or even thousands, might be said to be inconsiderable."[154] He notes that Gibbon tries to emphasize the leniency of the magistrates by saying that they frequently suspended the death penalty, "contenting themselves, for the most part, with the milder chastisements of imprisonment, exile, or slavery in the mines."[155] "Mild," Priestley observes, is hardly the proper adjective.[156] He also accuses Gibbon of giving a false impression of the number of martyrs by assuming that the notable martyrdoms recorded by Eusebius were the only martyrdoms, whereas there were no doubt many more.[157] Gibbon's treatment of Cyprian is, Priestley asserts, typical of how he relates a martyrdom "in a manner as favourable to the persecutors, and as unfavourable to the martyr, as possible."[158] Gibbon implies that Cyprian suffered in order to avoid "the abhorrence of his Christian brethren and the contempt of the Gentile world";[159] yet earlier Gibbon had said that those who publicly rejected Christianity "were dismissed from the tribunal in safety and with applause."[160] Obviously, Priestley concludes, Gibbon changes his account as his purpose to discredit the early Christians requires. As for Gibbon's ironic lamentation over the "supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses,"[161] Priestley responds that "if they did not give proper *attention*, and did not trouble themselves to make the necessary *inquiries*, their unbelief reflects no discredit on Christianity."[162]

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[150] _An History of the Corruptions of Christianity_, V, 492.

[151] Jan. 28, 1783. _The Letters of Edward Gibbon_, ed. by J. E. Norton (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956), II, 320-21.

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[152] _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_, Part II, IV, 536.

[153] Gibbon, _Decline and Fall_, p. 98.

[154] _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_, Part II, IV, 543.

[155] Gibbon, _Decline and Fall_, p. 97.

[156] _Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever_, Part II, IV, 544.

[157] _Ibid._, p. 545; Gibbon, _Decline and Fall_, pp. 137-38.

[158] _Ibid._

What most offended Priestley was Gibbon's refusal to avow his skepticism directly. It was, he said, as if a man were to perceive that a ship were sinking, and yet amuse himself by speaking in such a way that some of those on board understood him in one way and others in another, instead of giving the "greatest and quickest alarm that he can."[163] To one who never hesitated to speak out frankly on even the most controversial topics, Gibbon's indirect and ironic approach seemed a cowardly and dishonest way to handle religious, and, therefore, ultimately important issues.

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[159] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, p. 103.

[160] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[161] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[162] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part II, IV, 541.

[163] *Ibid.*, p. 450.

Priestley, of course, was correct in maintaining that Gibbon carefully arranged his narrative to discredit early Christianity, but he failed to see that the scientific historian, even though he is a devout believer, cannot, without exceeding the limits of his data, deal with the supernatural causes of events. These are beyond empirical investigation and, therefore, beyond the judgment, either positive or negative, of one who subjects himself to the canons of the scientific method. The secular historian, as Gibbon rightly insisted, must confine himself to a study of the "secondary causes." Whether these are, in turn, the effects of divine activity is an affirmation of religious faith. Of course, as even Hume admitted,[164] the actual occurrence of a violation of the usual course of nature, such as Priestley claimed accompanied divine revelation, is susceptible to empirical investigation; although, as was suggested earlier,[165] whether or not the available evidence is convincing is ultimately a matter of the historian's "faith." It may be, therefore, that Gibbon's skeptical presuppositions prevented him from paying sufficient attention to the evidence for miracles. But even so, the historian can only affirm that such unusual events did or did not happen. He cannot say anything about a supernatural cause for them because, by definition, such a cause transcends the empirical limits of his method of inquiry.

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[164] Supra, p. 164.

[165] Ibid.

4. Moral Tendency

Priestley also believed that the course of history demonstrated the superior moral tendency of adherence to Christian doctrine, and, conversely, the immoral tendency of its corruptions and of infidelity. We shall point out in the chapters that follow how he employed the argument from moral effect to distinguish pure Christian doctrines from their corruptions. Here we need only note his general claim that Christianity's superior contributions to moral progress serve to confirm its divine authority. He summarized these contributions in the Institutes:

> The Christian religion has evidently effected a reformation of the idolatry and abominable customs of the Gentile world; an effect which all the wisdom and philosophy of mankind would never have produced . . .
>
> Christianity has also bettered the state of the world in a civil and political respect, giving men a just idea of their mutual relations and natural rights, and thereby gradually abolishing slavery . . . and also many cruel and barbarous customs. The generous principles of Christianity have greatly contributed to render those European governments, which are nominally arbitrary, more favourable to security and happiness, than the freest ancient Heathen states.[166]

The wicked actions done by nominally Christian men and nations are, he argues, either the result of habits and passions not yet altered by the influence of Christian principles,[167] or, the perverse effects of corruptions of these principles.[168] Even so,

> as it may be clearly proved, that the very worst state of Christendom, with respect to religion, and the influence of it,

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[166] Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion, II, 159-60.

[167] Ibid., p. 104.

[168] Ibid., p. 160.

> was preferable to Heathenism, at the time of the promulgation of Christianity, it may be hoped that, with the restoration of genuine Christianity, we shall see the revival of all the happy effects of it.[169]

In short, the oppressive reign of Christian "priestcraft," so frequently lamented by Enlightenment critics of religion, has been clearly more conducive to moral progress than paganism was, and, once Christianity is purged of its corruptions, its moral influence will become even more powerful and hence more manifest.

5. The Development of the Corruptions of Christianity

"To consider the system (if it may be called a *system*) of Christianity *a priori*," Priestley declares, "one would think it very little liable to corruption or abuse." Its general outline is that God commissioned Jesus Christ to invite men to live virtuously by the assurance of mercy to the penitent and the promise of a future life, in proof of which he wrought numerous miracles and, after being publicly executed, rose from the dead. He also directed that proselytes to his religion should be baptized and that his followers should eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of his death. "Here is nothing that any person could imagine would lead to much subtle speculation, . . . The doctrine itself is so plain." And yet "monstrous corruptions and abuses . . . crept into the system afterwards."[170]

A superficial observer might conclude that since these many additional doctrines are generally accepted as essential parts of true Christianity that they must have been part of the original revelation. In order to prove that they are actually corruptions of that revelation it is necessary to account for their presence by means of purely natural causes.

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[169] *Ibid.*

[170] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 480-81.

Priestley maintained that by means of historical investigation one could "trace every such corruption to its proper source, and . . . show what circumstances . . . , and especially of other prevailing opinions and prejudices, made the alteration, in doctrine or practice, sufficiently natural, and the introduction and establishment of it easy."[171] This was, of course, the primary intention of An History of the Corruption of Christianity. By giving an historical explanation of the strictly natural causes which made the doctrines to which he objected part of orthodox Christian belief, Priestley sought to prove that they really were "corruption(s) of Christianity, and no part of the original scheme."[172]

His hope, of course, was that once pure original Christianity was brought to light, those who now reject it because they mistake its corruptions for its essence would be brought to give attention to the proper evidence for it. Believers would also find their faith strengthened.

> For the more their abhorrence and indignation are excited by the consideration of what has so long passed for Christianity, the more highly will they esteem what is truly so, the contrast will be so striking, and so greatly in its favor.[173]

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[171] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, p. 8.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid.

Fair evaluation of Priestley's historical approach to theology can be made only in the light of his application of it to particular doctrines, and it is to this task that we now turn.

PART III

THE PURIFICATION OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Priestley dealt with a wide range of theological problems in the course of his effort to purge Christianity of its corruptions. Among them are the Divine Unity and Trinity, Christology, the atonement, grace, the nature of man and the soul, providence and predestination, sin and evil, ethics, eschatology, the authority and interpretation of Scripture, the sacraments, angelology, Mariology, the veneration of saints and relics, monasticism, church polity, ministry, discipline, ecclesiastical revenues, and church and state.[1] Some of these topics have already been treated, but it would overextend this essay to examine all of them and the numerous related issues. Instead, I shall focus on three doctrines which are central in Priestley's thought and which occasioned the greatest controversy among his contemporaries: (1) the Divine Unity and its corollary, the simple humanity of Jesus; (2) the material nature of man and the related doctrine of necessity; (3) religious liberty.

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[1] All these topics receive attention in *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 1-507. See also *A General History of the Christian Church to the Fall of the Western Empire and From the Fall of the Western Empire to the Present Time*, VIII, IX-X.

CHAPTER I

THE UNITY OF GOD AND THE SIMPLE HUMANITY OF JESUS

Basil Willey points out in his fine essay on Priestley in The Eighteenth Century Background that Priestley's movement from Calvinism to Unitarianism "merely illustrates in epitome what was going on widely amongst the dissenting congregations in the eighteenth century."[1] As was noted in the Introduction, the Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist congregations which had remained separate from the Established Church since the Toleration Act were, on account of their necessary commitment to religious toleration, susceptible to liberalizing influences in theology, and many of them moved through Arianism into Unitarianism.

Priestley's grandfather and namesake was an Anglican,[2] but his parents were devout Independents.[3] His mother died when he was six, but by the time he was four she had already taught him to recite the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism "without missing a word."[4] After her death Priestley was brought up by his father's sister, Mrs. Keighley, who "was truly Calvinistic in principle, but who was far from confining salvation to those who thought as she did on religious subjects."[5] Her home, as was noted earlier, was open to all the Dissenting ministers in the area, regardless of their theological opinions, and Priestley became the friend of two of the most frequent guests, William Graham and Thomas Walker, who were, he says, "the most heretical ministers in the neighborhood."[6] The result was that Mrs. Keighley's ward was reared with "sentiments of piety, but without bigotry; and . . . as much confirmed as I well could be in the principles of Calvinism, all the books that came in my way having that tendency."[7]

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[1] Willey, op. cit., p. 181.

[2] Familiar Letters Addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham 1790 , XIX, 154.

[3] Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787, I, Part I, 10.

[4] A fact recalled by his brother Timothy Priestley and quoted by Rutt in ibid., p. 5.

Still, the conversations of Graham, Walker, and the other ministers who visited his aunt were not without effect on the eager young listener. He was particularly impressed by the criticisms of the Westminster doctrine of predestination made by John Walker, an unsuccessful candidate for the pastorate at the local Independent church (Upper Chapel, Heckmondwike) in 1751, who visited in the Keighley home.[8] When he applied for the status of communicant at Heckmondwike he was rejected because he found it impossible to give the church's elders a satisfactory answer as to whether the entire human race was damned only because of the sin of Adam.[9] By the time he left home for Daventry Academy in 1752 to study for the ministry he had become an avowed Arminian.[10]

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[6] *Ibid.* It was Graham, not Walker as Willey mistakenly says (Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 184), who became a "lasting friend" and left Priestley £ 200 in his will.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 15. Alexander Gordon reports that when they met again on the eve of Priestley's departure for America, Priestley said: "Ah, Walker, it was you who first led me astray from the paths of orthodoxy." A. Gordon, "Priestley as a Pioneer in Theological Science," *Heads of English Unitarian History*, pp. 102-34, p. 106.

At Daventry, the successor to Philip Doddridge's Northampton Academy, Priestley enjoyed an atmosphere which encouraged free theological discussion. The two tutors, Dr. Caleb Ashworth and Mr. Samuel Clark, took the opposite sides of every question and required their students to read and report on conflicting viewpoints. It was during this time that Priestley discovered Hartley's *Observations on Man* which converted him to philosophical determinism.[11] By the time he left Daventry, he had also become an Arian, which was the "extreme of heresy among us," and had begun to have serious doubts about the atonement.[12]

During his first pastorate at Needham Market, which lasted three years, he retained his Arianism, but came to reject the doctrine of the atonement, as well as the divine inspiration and infallibility of Scripture.[13] There followed ten busy years, first at Nantwich Chapel and then at Warrington Academy, when his duties as pastor and teacher left him no time for further theological speculation.[14]

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[9] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 14.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-39.

In September, 1767, Priestley left Warrington to resume pastoral duties, this time at Mill-hill Chapel, Leeds, where a larger salary and a liberal minded congregation enabled him to resume his theological study. This, in turn, led to a further liberalizing of his views.[15] Nathaniel Lardner had just died, and, perhaps for this reason, Priestley now read his Letter on the Logos, written in 1730, but not published until 1759, and then anonymously.[16] Lardner argued from Scripture and the testimony of the Fathers that Jesus was a human being with a human soul and body who was uniquely endowed with divine power and was, therefore, the Messiah. He was born of a virgin, but he was not a pre-existent being and the term "logos" did not refer to such a being, but only to divine power. Priestley was convinced by Lardner's reasoning and, giving up Arianism, which denied Christ's equality with God, but maintained his pre-existence, became a Unitarian, or, to use the term still popular in the eighteenth century, a "Socinian."[17] When, during his subsequent service to Lord Shelburne (1773-1780), he became convinced that man was "wholly material" and that the belief in a separate immaterial and eternal soul was unwarranted,[18] it only confirmed his opinion that "Christ was a man like ourselves, and consequently that his pre-existence, as well as that of other men, was a notion that had no foundation in reason or in the Scriptures."[19]

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[14] Ibid., p. 69.

[15] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

[16] [N. Lardner], A Letter Written in the Year 1730, concerning the question, Whether the Logos Supplied the Place of an Human Soul in the Person of Jesus Christ [London, 1759] (Republished by the Society for Promoting the Knowledge of the Scriptures, 1788).

[17] Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley in Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787, I, Part I, 69.

Lardner had not explained in his treatise how the belief that Christ was divine had originated, or how it came to be accepted as orthodox, except for a brief reference to its being brought into the church by "heathen converts."[20] But Priestley writes:

> Having been gradually led (in consequence of wishing to trace the principal corruptions of Christianity) to give particular attention to ecclesiastical history, I could not help thinking but that . . . there must be some traces of the rise and progress of the doctrine of the Trinity.[21]

The result of his investigations was the opening section of _An History of the Corruptions of Christianity_ which presented the evidence for "the long and universal spread, of what I deem to be a radical corruption of the genuine Christian doctrine."[22]

However, before setting forth Priestley's historical evidences for the corruption of the primitive Christology, we shall note the arguments for Unitarianism that he derived from reason and Scripture. He himself declared that it was his prior conviction that the Trinitarian "hypothesis" and the pre-existence of Christ were contrary to both reason and Scripture which led him to seek out additional confirmation from history.[23]

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[18] On Priestley's materialism see _infra_, chap. 2.

[19] _Letters to Dr. Horsley_, XVIII, 41.

[20] Lardner, _op. cit._, pp. 41-42.

[21] _Letters to Dr. Horsley_, XVIII, 41.

[22] _Ibid._

Only a few persons "of a peculiarly fanciful turn, and previously persuaded of the truth of it" have ever imagined that the doctrine of the Trinity could be suggested by anything in the course of nature, Priestley declared, and since his own writings could not possibly have any effect on such people, it would be a waste of time to discuss these *a posteriori* reasons.[24] Instead, he concentrated his attack upon those who supposed the doctrine to be contained in Scripture, and above, but not contrary to, reason. Such a position, he sought to show, was either not really Trinitarian or involved a contradiction.[25]

If one asserts that the three persons of the Godhead are all equal, each of them possessing all divine perfections, then each of them must be *a God*, just as any being possessing all the properties of man must be a man, so that the result in the former case is three gods, just as in the latter case it would be three men. It is logically impossible for three things to which the same definition applies to make one thing to which the same definition applies. If each of the three persons is "perfect God," even though they may be said to differ in other respects, they cannot logically be said to be one God any more than three men, differing from one another, can be called one man.

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[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God*, XVIII, 527.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 527-29.

If one describes the Father as "the fountain of Deity," and the Son as generated from Him, either necessarily or voluntarily, either in time or from eternity, the Son must be inferior, because he is only the effect of his Father's originating powers. Moreover, there is no good reason why the generative process should stop after the production of only one Son, or after the production of Son and Holy Spirit. "Why does not the same operation in them produce a fourth, &c., &c., &c.?"[26]

If one speaks, in Sabellian fashion, of one Supreme Mind which exerts itself in three different modes, then unity is purchased at the expense of a meaningful trinity, since, on the same principle, one man, exercising three different offices, would be three different men.

Philip Doddridge, distinguished Nonconformist educator and theologian at the beginning of the century, had attempted to explain the Trinity by saying that "God is so _united_ to the derived nature of Christ, and does so dwell in it, that, by virtue of that _union_, Christ may be properly called God, and such regards become due to him, as are not due to any _created_ nature."[27] But such a position is really closer to Arianism or Socinianism, both of which maintain that God was present with Christ and acted by him. Because, in this case, the union is one which God imparts, he may withdraw it again, so that Christ's divinity is dependent upon the will of another, which is a very peculiar kind of divinity.

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[26] _An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ_, VI, 36.

[27] Quoted by Priestley in _ibid_., p. 529.

Therefore, none of these theories, to which all others may be reduced, provide logical support for the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity that God is three equal and distinct persons of the same substance, yet one.

The Arian doctrine of an inferior but, nevertheless, divine and pre-existent Christ who created and governs the world involves no strict contradiction, but is still highly improbable _a priori_. If we can believe that the universe points to an intelligent author, it is quite possible that this author had a higher author, and so on ad infinitum, since the universe is a "limited production" and its maker may therefore be finite. But other considerations militate against this.

If this derived Being, the creator and governor of the world, assumed a human nature, he must either have retained and exercised his mighty powers while incarnate, or temporarily have surrendered them. The "mind revolts" at the thought of an infant in his mother's arms or a man hanging on a cross simultaneously sustaining the whole universe. In addition, if Christ still retained his powers, then he must have wrought his miracles by them, yet in the gospel accounts he expressly disclaims any such thing, saying that "the Son can do nothing of himself" (John 5:19) and that he did "the works which the Father has granted me" (John 5:36). If, on the other hand, the Incarnate One relinquished his former powers, he must either have turned them over to yet another such derived being (which Arianism does not provide), or the Supreme Being must have assumed them himself, which destroys the very transcendence Arianism seeks to defend by its assertion that creation is the work of a derived being.

If it is said that Christ emptied himself of the prerogatives of deity to become a mere man during his earthly stay, then why is it insufficient to say that he was, in fact, a mere man aided by God to perform certain mighty works? When one considers the objects of his mission, to communicate God's will for men and by a resurrection to assure men of eternal life, it seems far more fitting for him to have been no more than human, for otherwise it could be said that, as a being of much higher rank, his laws and powers might be different from and beyond our own.[28]

Also, if men's maker and ruler is a derived being, then, since they depend immediately on him, they naturally will look to him and pray to him, and the Supreme Being will be overlooked and "become a mere cypher in the universe."[29]

Two _a posteriori_ arguments from nature also tell against Arianism. Modern science supposes that there are innumerable planets inhabited by rational and finite creatures like ourselves, and it is likely that many of them have stood in as much need of a visit from their maker as has ours. It is improbable either that our spot in the universe should be the only fortunate one to receive such a visit or that the maker of the universe should suffer as many "degradations" as this scheme might require. Secondly, and most important for Priestley, there is absolutely no evidence from nature for an immaterial soul, existing independent of the body, and it is the belief in such a soul which lies behind any doctrine of Christ's pre-existence.[30]

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[28] _A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God_, XVIII, 529-31.

[29] _Ibid._, p. 531.

Scripture also provides no support for either Trinitarianism or Arianism.[31] It clearly teaches that there is only one God (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29; I Corinthians 8:6; Ephesian 4:5, 6, etc.). The word "Trinity" never occurs in the Scriptures, nor is it ever said that there are three persons in this one God; nor is the doctrine ever explicitly stated in any way. Christ did say that he and his father were one (John 10:30), but he explains the meaning of this by praying that his disciples might be made one with him in the same sense in which he is one with the Father (John 17:21, 22). Scripture also declares that this one God created all things; it does not suggest that he employed an inferior agent to perform this work (Genesis 1:1, 3; Psalm 33:6, 9; Isaiah 44:24). This one God is also addressed as the Father, that is, the source of all beings, including Christ (John 6:27; 17:3; 20:17; Ephesians 1:17; Colossians 1:3). The New Testament expressly declares Christ to be subordinate to the Father and attributes all his power to the Father (John 14:28; I Corinthians 3:23; 11:3; John 5:19; 14:10; Matthew 28:18; II Peter 1:17; Revelation 1:1). To argue that these statements of Christ's inferiority apply only to his human nature and not to his divine nature is to render language meaningless. On the same principle one could say that Christ never died or never rose from the dead, secretly referring only to his divine nature. Such an abuse of language sets no limit to what interpretations may be wrung from it.

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[30] Ibid. See infra, chap. 2.

[31] Ibid., pp. 531-35. See also A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture, II, 430-80.

The Father withheld some things from Christ, such as knowledge of the date of the End (Mark 13:32) and of who should sit next to him in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 20:23), and Christ's dominion is clearly subordinate to the Father's (I Corinthians 15:24-28).[32] Christ prayed to the Father, and always with as much humility as any man could do (Matthew 26:37-39). The reasoning of the apostles in many passages is based upon the assumption that Christ was a man, notably in Acts 2:22 where Peter speaks of "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God"; Hebrews 2:17 where the author insists on the necessity of Christ being made like men in every respect so as to win the victory over sin and death; and I Corinthians 15:21 where Paul draws a parallel between the first man, Adam, and Christ. Also, Christ's exaltation, whatever that involves, is said to be the gift of the Father and reward for his perfect obedience (Philippians 2:8, 9; Hebrews 2:9; 12:2).

Significantly, the New Testament never makes any use of the doctrine of the incarnation of the creator of the world, neither suggesting why such an extraordinary measure was necessary for salvation nor that it was necessary. A few passages may seem to allude to it (notably John 1:1-10; Colossians 1:16-20; Hebrews 1:1, 2), but it would seem that if an act of this magnitude were true, it would have been declared explicitly, if not clearly explained; so that men would not be left in doubt of the great things done for them.

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[32] It has already been noted that Priestley argued for Christ's fallibility by pointing to his attribution of mental illness to demons. Supra, p. 109.

When Richard Price, Priestley's good friend, but an Arian, appealed to these passages in support of his belief that Christ "made this world only, with its connexions and dependencies,"[33] Priestley countered with the Socinian interpretation of them.[34] The introduction to John's gospel attributes creation to the Logos, not Christ, the Logos referring to the power of God and not to Christ himself. Hebrews 1:1, 2 says that "ages," not "worlds," were made by Christ, so that here creation is being used in something other than the ordinary sense. This particular sense is similar to that found in Colossians 1:16-20 which specifies only thrones, dominions, principalities, etc., as made by Christ, not any material substances, such as the heavenly bodies, so that it may well be that creation here means only the exercise of power given to Christ after his resurrection. That this was the apostles meaning in Colossians is rendered more evident by his concluding the list of those things created by Christ with reference to his headship over the church, as if this comprehended all the preceding items. Also, just as the former part of the passage speaks of Christ creating all things in heaven and earth, the latter speaks of his reconciling all things in heaven and earth, so that the two expressions, "created" and "reconciled," seem to be used synonymously and to describe the new creation or "renovation" of the world by Christ. The biblical writers frequently use creation with this soteriological meaning (Isaiah 65:17, 18; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10), and since the creation of heaven and earth, whenever they are mentioned specifically, is always attributed to God the Father, and creation in the soteriological sense, in the New Testament, only to Christ, there is no scriptural warrant for ascribing the creation of the world in the literal sense to Christ.

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[33] R. Price, *Sermons on the Christian Doctrine, as received by the different Denominations of Christians* [London, 1787] (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1815), p. 95.

[34] "Letters to The Rev. Dr. Price" in *Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1786* [1787], XVIII, 385-89.

As for what Price calls "the most decisive text of all" for supporting the "pre existent dignity of Christ," Philippians 2:5-8,[35] Priestley points out that the phrase "the form of God," whatever its meaning, is not said to have belonged to Christ before his birth, and that it probably refers to his power to work miracles. His "emptying" himself of this power refers to his voluntary surrender of himself to his enemies.[36]

Finally, whatever problems a few particular texts may present, the general tenor of Scripture, Priestley argued in one of his letters to Samuel Horsley, supports Unitarianism, whereas

> on the contrary, . . . the Trinitarians [and one can add Arians][37] cannot find *their* doctrine either in the general tenor, or in any

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[35] Price, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

[36] *Defences of Unitarianism for the year 1786*, XVIII, 396-98.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 414.

> clear texts of scripture, but . . . they deduce it from particular expressions and circumstances, which, when rightly explained, do by no means authorize their conclusions.[38]

Nor is Trinitarianism or Arianism conducive to morality. Such doctrines as those of a future life and the "Divine placability" clearly encourage virtuous living, but no such connection can be shown with the belief in the deity and pre-existence of Christ.[39] Salvation does not require the atoning death of a divine being, as Trinitarians claim, because surely the creator of the world can forgive his creatures' sins if they repent (just as we forgive our fellows on the same grounds) "without the strange expedient of another person, fully equal to himself, condescending to animate a human body, and dying for us."[40] Nor does the perfect obedience even to death of a divine being equal the moral inspiration provided by the example of a perfectly obedient man. Price's argument that the thought of so great a divine being as Christ condescending to suffer and die for us inspires our devotion is undercut by the fact that to assert his divinity is to make his example of no relevance to mere men.[41] Priestley even refused to assert that Christ was "naturally impeccable," because "a man like ourselves, incident to the imperfections of other men is . . . better adapted to be an example to us, than any being of a nature superior to ours."[42]

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[38] Letters to Dr. Horsley, XVIII, p. 538.

[39] Defences of Unitarianism for the year 1786, XVIII, 340.

[40] Letters to Dr. Horsley, XVIII, 98. Priestley himself believed that the purpose of Christ's death was to provide a moral example of obedience to God and to display the resurrection which is its reward. See An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, 100-05.

[41] Defences of Unitarianism for the year 1786, XVIII, 376-78.

Moreover, Trinitarian and Arian theories have an "uncouth appearance," have "always confounded the best reason of mankind," and compel their defenders to speak of "*inexplicable mysteries*, to the great offense of *Jews*, *Mahometans*, and unbelievers in general," with the result that Christianity, with its unrivaled moral effects, is too often rejected altogether.[43]

Priestley presented the historical evidence for the primitive Christian belief in the simple humanity of Christ, and the process of its corruption, in the opening section of *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. Although he went on in the book to attack as corrupt the traditional understandings of the atonement, grace, original sin, predestination, saints, angels, the state of the dead, and the sacraments, as well as certain aspects of church liturgy and discipline, episcopacy, celibacy, the papacy, and church establishment, it was his treatment of Christology which stirred the most controversy. Between 1783, when the book appeared, and 1790, Priestley wrote numerous defenses of his position,[44] of which the chief was *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers; Proving that the Christian Church was at first Unitarian*. His most notable adversary on the subject was Bishop Samuel Horsley,[45] but he also published replies to many others. Most of these appeared in the *Defences of Unitarianism*, which Priestley published in 1787, 1788, and 1790.

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[42] *Ibid*., p. 405.

[43] *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 99.

[44] *A Reply to the Animadversions on the History of the Corruptions of Christianity in the Monthly Review for June 1783 with Additional Observations Relating to the Doctrine of the Primitive Church, Concerning the Person of Christ* [1783], XVIII, 3-37; *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 38-116, 519-27; *A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God*, XVIII, 513-19, 527-35; *Remarks on the Article of the Monthly Review for September*, 1783, *in Answer to the Reply to Some Former Animadversions in That Work* [1783], XVIII, 117-24; *Remarks on the Monthly Review, of the Letters to Dr. Horsley; in*

The controversy followed Priestley to America. Shortly after his arrival in New York he and his wife attended the Presbyterian church with Governor Clinton, but after the minister had issued the invitation to communion he stretched his hand palm outward toward the Priestleys and declared, "But none, no, none of those who deny the divinity of our Saviour."[46] A few weeks later in Philadelphia, Mr. William Rogers, minister of the Baptist church in Second Street, bade his people beware, for "a Priestley has entered the land";

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which The Rev. Mr. Samuel Badcock, the Writer of that Review, is Called Upon to Defend What He Has Advanced in It [1784], XVIII, 125-42; *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, Part II [1784], XVIII, 143-274, 535-41; *Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in This Country*, XVIII, 541-51; *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, VI, 3-510, VII, 3-200, 513-14; *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, Part III [1786], XVIII, 275-314; *Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1786*, XVIII, 317-424; *Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1787*, XVIII, 425-511; *Defences of Unitarianism for the years 1788 and 1789* [1790], XIX, 3-110; *Letters to the Bishops upon the Subject of the Controversy with Dr. Horsley* [1815], XIX, 509-23. (Listed in chronological order.)

[45] Samuel Horsley, *Tracts in Controversy with Dr. Priestley Upon the Historical Question of the Belief of the First Ages in Our Lord's Divinity* [1783, 1784, 1786] (3rd ed.; Dundee: Printed by A. Smith and Co. for J. Chalmers, 1812).

[46] Told by Rutt in *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Life and Correspondence 1787-1804*, I, Part II, 256.

and then, kneeling as if in prayer, exclaimed, "O, Lamb of God! how would they pluck thee from thy throne!"[47]

It would be impossible within the bounds of this thesis to discuss all the points raised in the course of the debate, but Priestley's main arguments can be stated. The patristic writers, he maintains, testify that two types of heresy existed in the apostolic period--that which said Christ was no more than a man, and Gnosticism, which declared him to be a man only in appearance. The apostle John vigorously criticized Gnosticism in his writings (e.g., I John 1:2, 3), but did not mention the former heresy, which strongly suggests that he did not see it as heretical at all.[48] The Jews' chief objection to what is now orthodox Christianity has always been that it is polytheistic; yet, among the numerous Jewish objections to Christianity recorded in Acts, there is no mention of this issue, nor did any of the apostolic authors deal with it. The most reasonable explanation for this silence would seem to be that no one had yet given cause for such an objection by preaching the divinity of Christ.[49] Moreover, there is no indication in the New Testament of the time or circumstances when the apostles learned that Jesus, whom they certainly first took to be a man, was in fact their God and maker. Surely, the moment and manner of such a discovery would have been recorded. Nor is there any evidence of the effect of such an idea upon their minds, since they always addressed him and spoke of him as a man.[50]

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[47] Ibid., p. 263. Later Rogers and Priestley became good friends, p. 264.

[48] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, 17-18.

[49] Letters to Dr. Horsley, XVIII, 82, 83.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. the only Jewish Christians remaining were the Ebionites, or "poor," some of whom did not believe in the miraculous conception, but none of whom believed Christ to be divine; and it is not likely that if this group had been informed of the latter by the apostles that they would have abandoned it so quickly.[51] It is also significant that prayers were not addressed to Jesus in early times, but only gradually came to be so as belief in his deity arose.[52] Both Athanasius and Chrysostom testify to the silence of the apostles concerning Christ's divinity, although they say it was in order to avoid offending the Jews; yet, the apostles never hesitated to combat other Jewish prejudices, so that their silence is more likely explained by ignorance than by strategic considerations.[53]

Hegesippus, "the first Christian historian," writing about the middle of the second century, takes care to enumerate the heresies of his time, but these are all Gnostic, and he does not mention any of the type which would now be called Unitarian.[54] All those deemed heretics by those who called themselves orthodox Christians were excommunicated and given a particular label, but no Unitarians were expelled until Victor excommunicated Theodotus at the end of the second century, nor were they labeled until Epiphanius called them "Alogi" in the fourth century. It is true that the Gentile Christians expelled the Ebionites, but this was because of their continued adherence to the Mosaic Law, not their Christology.[55] The fact that the *regula fidei* as quoted by Tertullian in *De Virginibus velandis* refers to Jesus simply as the son of God is further evidence that Unitarianism was not considered heretical at the end of the second century.[56]

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[50] Ibid., pp. 81, 82.

[51] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, 16, 17.

[52] Letters to Dr. Horsley, XVIII, 95, 96.

[53] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, 19.

[54] Ibid., p. 17.

Eusebius, in spite of his prejudice against Unitarianism, acknowledges that its supporters claimed that theirs was the dominant view until the time of Victor.[57] Justin Martyr, who believed in Christ's pre-existence, never calls the contrary view heretical, and even speaks "apologetically" of his own, saying that he would never agree that Christ was a mere man, in spite of ever so many who hold that opinion.[58] Irenaeus, who wrote so extensively on heresies, says very little concerning the Ebionites and never calls them heretics.[59] Tertullian says that the majority of unlearned Christians, the *idiotae*, were Unitarians,[60] Athanasius speaks of a similar belief among the hoi polloi,[61] and it is to be remembered that it is among such ordinary folk that we discover the oldest opinions, whereas the learned are always more inclined to innovations. Moreover, it is clear from the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Basil of Caesarea that the doctrine of Christ's divinity was long unpopular with the unlearned Christians, who saw it as a threat to the supremacy of God the Father, and that they were persuaded to accept it only with great difficulty.[62]

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[55] *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 62-64.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[57] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 22-23.

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[60] *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 23, 24.

The deification of Christ originally stemmed from the desire of Christians to ease the difficulty of persuading unbelievers, especially the more philosophically minded, to become disciples of a man crucified "like the vilest malefactor."[63] Paul had seen correctly that, although the crucifixion was a stumbling block, God had, by bringing about the death and resurrection of one in all respects like themselves, chosen the most effective way to assure men of a future life. But later Christians, especially those influenced by Oriental or Greek philosophy, unfortunately sought to overcome this obstacle by raising the dignity of Christ's person.

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[61] *Ibid*., pp. 76, 77.

[62] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 40-42. When Alexander Geddes, noted liberal Roman Catholic biblical scholar, urged it to be inconceivable that the three hundred bishops representing all areas of the church at the Nicene Council could have approved a doctrine different from that held by the majority of their people, Priestley replied that "there was no House of Commons in that assembly." *Defences of Unitarianism, for the year 1787*, XVIII, 433.

[63] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 24. The following historical account of the deification of Christ is derived, except where noted, from *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 23-40.

Two things made this easier for them: the manner of scriptural interpretation deriving from Philo of Alexandria and other learned Jews, and certain pagan philosophical ideas which had begun to affect Jewish thought itself.

One of the most widespread of these ideas was that the supreme Divine Mind, which had existed from eternity, had initiated a series of emanations which produced numerous intelligences of descending rank, some of those of lower standing being the pre-existent souls of men. Certain persons seized upon this system to exalt the crucified Jesus and proclaimed that his soul was not like that of other men, but a principal emanation from the Divine Mind itself which had temporarily dwelt in a body, or what appeared to be one. This viewpoint, known as Gnosticism, had many variations, but all were firmly rejected by the apostles, especially John.

Nevertheless, later philosophically minded Christians were not discouraged from attempting to deify Christ, and, by personifying the Platonic Logos, they provided the basis for what became the orthodox position. Plato himself probably meant by the term only the quality of intelligence in the Divine Mind, but Philo personified the Logos, calling it a second God, attributing creation to it, and equating it with the Old Testament "word of God." Christian apologists trained in Greek philosophy soon found that the idea enabled them to exalt their Master before learned heathens by declaring him to be the person of the Logos incarnate. By means of the allegorical interpretations of Scripture developed by Philo, they were easily able to find sufficient authority for their opinions.

Another factor contributing to the development of the doctrine of Christ's divinity was the belief, also derived from Platonism, that it was "unworthy of the Supreme Being himself to condescend to do anything; he being supposed to be immoveably employed in contemplation only, and chiefly that of his own perfections." The result was that "Platonizing Christians" assigned to Christ, as the incarnate Logos, rather than to God the Father, the task of creation.[64]

Justin Martyr, who was himself a Platonist before he became a Christian, was probably the first to employ the idea of the personified Logos as a way of ascribing divinity to Christ, but neither he nor any other theologian through the Council of Nicaea (325) spoke of Christ, or the Logos, as equal to or, as a distinct person, co-eternal with the Father. Rather, the Logos was understood to be a divine attribute of God which had always existed, as reason exists in man, but which had not become a distinct personality until just prior to the creation. Caught between the desire to exalt Christ before unbelievers and the need to satisfy the monotheism of earlier Jewish and Gentile converts, the Fathers were careful to say that Christ, as the incarnate Logos, was consubstantial with God, and, at the same time, to distinguish him in status from the Father by saying that whereas the Father was self-existent, the Logos, or Son, derived his existence from the Father.

Unitarianism was, as we have seen,[65] not considered heretical until the end of the second century, and even after that there were those who still clung to the proper humanity of Christ, although the opposing tendency waxed steadily stronger. Among their leaders were Theodotus of Byzantium, Artemon, Praxeas, Noetus, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, and, finally, Photinus,[66] the last recorded Unitarian leader of the patristic age. Photinus was expelled from the church in 351, and thereafter Unitarianism was "overborne and silenced by the Trinitarians on the one hand, and the Arians on the other" until the appearance of Socinus in the sixteenth century.[67]

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[64] An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, VII, 182.

[65] Supra, pp. 206-07.

As for Arianism, its popularity was largely due to the widespread discontent among rank and file Christians with the increasing tendency to equate Christ with God the Father, but there is no evidence that, as a doctrine, it is any older than Arius himself. The Arian doctrine that the Logos incarnate in Christ pre-existed, but is neither co-eternal nor consubstantial with the Father is a position midway between that of maintaining the simple humanity of Jesus and that of asserting his proper divinity. Its appearance as a compromise recommended it to many, but it has no basis in Scripture and is, in fact, more clearly polytheistic than Trinitarianism, since it calls the Logos divine, but denies its oneness with the Father in essence or eternity.[68] Arianism's chief effect was to spur the orthodox after Nicaea to insist that the

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[66] Priestley acknowledges differences in their positions, but argues that all held to Christ's simple humanity.

[67] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 48-52.

[68] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-57; *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, VII, 130-60.

Logos had existed as a distinct personality from eternity and that he was equal to the Father.

The doctrine of the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit arose from the misunderstanding of Christ's instructions to the apostles, according to Matthew 28:19, to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The words meant nothing more than "baptizing into that religion which was given by the Father, by means of the Son, and confirmed by miraculous power,"[69] and the particular form does not seem even to have been used by the apostles, who baptized only in the name of Jesus; but the form did gradually come into universal use, and since both Father and Son were known to be distinct persons, it was natural to suppose that the Spirit was one too. Nevertheless, the New Testament does not support such a doctrine, but understands the Spirit merely as divine power. Occasionally the Spirit is personified, but these are clearly figurative uses of language to refer to the presence and activity of the one God. The early Fathers' language on the subject is so similar to that of the Scriptures that it is impossible to ascertain whether they meant a power or person, but, in any case, it was not until the Council of Constantinople in 381 that the Holy Spirit was formally declared to be a part of the Godhead and implied as consubstantial with the Father and the Son. With this action, the doctrine of the Trinity was, in its fundamentals, complete.[70]

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[69] *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, V, 58.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 57-63.

The last great contributor to the Trinitarian scheme was Augustine ("Austin") who stated most boldly the equality of the three persons and who offered the analogy of the three persons to man's memory, understanding, and will.[71] The history of his religious development also provides additional evidence for the part played by Platonism in the development of the doctrine, for he says that he considered Christ to be no more than an excellent man until he read the works of the Platonists, and that he only became a Catholic Christian later, upon reading the Scriptures.[72]

Lardner, in his Letter on the Logos, had maintained that although Christ was only a man, he was the Messiah, possessed miraculous powers, and was born of a virgin. Priestley supported this position in the History of Corruptions, but by the time he wrote the History of Early Opinions he had come to reject the virgin birth.[73]

The testimony of "two contemporary historians," Matthew and Luke, is in the doctrine's favor, and the stylistic similarity of Luke's nativity account to the rest of his history suggests strongly that it was part of that gospel's original form. There is no record of a separate time when these introductions were added to the gospels, and Christians as early as Justin Martyr wrote in favor of the doctrine they contain.

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[71] Ibid., pp. 72-74.

[72] A General View of the Arguments for the Unity of God, XVIII, 516.

[73] An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, VII, 57-129.

On the other hand, all the writings of the early Unitarians on the subject are lost, so that there may have been objections raised at the time which now are lost. And, if these introductions were always believed to be written by Matthew and Luke, it is not easy to explain how any Christians, but especially the Jewish converts who held Matthew's gospel in such high esteem, could have rejected Christ's miraculous conception. Yet Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, and Eusebius all testify that the Jewish Christians, or Ebionites, rejected the virgin birth, and Epiphanius tells us that the Ebionite version of Matthew lacked the present introduction and that Marcion's version of Luke only began with the third chapter. In addition, each gospel still has a natural beginning, quite similar to that of Mark (and to that of John if the prelude on the Logos is omitted), if one leaves out the introductory material, by starting with an account of the preaching of John the Baptist. Moreover, the desire to increase Christ's dignity, which soon arose, probably encouraged many persons to adopt the nativity accounts on insufficient grounds.

There is no apparent reason why Christ should not have been conceived in the ordinary way, nor do we find one offered either in the New Testament or by the early Fathers. To say that he was conceived miraculously qualifies his humanity, which not only weakens his force as a moral example, but undermines the assurance of man's resurrection.

The virgin birth is not mentioned by any other New Testament author, and there is no indication of objections being raised to it, as there were in later periods, both of which facts suggest that the doctrine was not known or asserted in apostolic times. Nor is there any record of Mary, or anyone else who could have attested to the event (!), being questioned on the subject.

Both of the introductions to Matthew and Luke contain improbable circumstances, and neither is compatible with the other. The genealogies, both of which are said to belong to Joseph, are completely different. Matthew's account of the Wise Men's visit to Bethlehem is difficult to reconcile with Luke's account of Jesus' parents living at Nazareth and only going to Bethlehem for the census and promptly returning. Matthew even seems to suppose that Joseph and Mary were properly of Bethlehem and did not settle in Nazareth until after the journey to Egypt. Matthew's account appears to be a tortured attempt to have the story of Jesus' birth accord with what the writer mistakenly believes to be Old Testament prophecies. Nor does it seem probable, as Luke's account assumes, that a woman so near to delivery would need to travel so far for the sake of a census.

The remainders of these gospels are inconsistent with their respective introductions. If the nativity stories were true, then knowledge of Jesus' messiahship would have been widely known from his birth, yet neither his education, his manner of conducting his public ministry, nor the reactions of persons around him indicate that anyone knew of it until he himself revealed it to a few of his followers. Besides, if the story of the miraculous conception were well founded, it is inexplicable why John and Mark omitted it.

If Jesus was not the son of Joseph, then he did not descend from David's line as Old Testament prophecy predicted of the Messiah. Moreover, there is no prophecy concerning the Messiah's miraculous conception. If one examines the most appealed to text, Isaiah 7:14-16, closely, it becomes apparent that it does not refer to a miraculous conception, but to the fact that before a woman now a virgin can conceive a son, Judah will be delivered from the threat of invasion. In fact, the key word, almah, can be translated simply as "young woman."[74]

Priestley's conclusion is that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary and that the introductions to Matthew and Luke were not written by their supposed authors, but later by other persons, that subsequently they were added to the gospels by those who admired them, and afterwards copied as proper parts of the original gospels.

But if parts of these works which Priestley is so certain are reliable histories are spurious, then how can one retain confidence in the remainder? Priestley's answer is that although the accounts of the principal and essential facts of Christ's life were never challenged in the age in which they were recorded, that of the miraculous conception was never accepted by those who were in the best position to know--the Jewish Christians; yet their disbelief in this particular event did not prevent them from accepting the rest of the gospel history. No history is to be accepted merely on faith in its author, but properly on the testimony of his contemporaries, who would not permit a false account to pass on unchallenged. The records of the main events in Christ's life pass this test; the miraculous conception does not.[75]

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[74] As the Revised Standard Version so translates it.

Many of Priestley's arguments and evidences for a Unitarian Christology were, and remain, debatable, and, in some cases, highly dubious. Few scholars would agree that New Testament Christology is clearly and consistently Unitarian or that the majority of Christians were Unitarians through the second century. It is obvious that, as he himself admits, he began his investigation of early Christian history "fully persuaded that Christ was a man like ourselves" and that "in this state of mind, the reader will easily perceive that I naturally expected to find, what I was previously well persuaded *was to be found* . . . nor can I possibly help the influence of that persuasion in my historical researches."[76]

On the other hand, Priestley was certainly correct in his general thesis that there was, in his terms, a *history* of early opinions concerning Jesus Christ; that is, that Christological and Trinitarian doctrine did not spring full blown from the apostolic period, but underwent gradual development in response to changing circumstances. On this point he was much nearer right than Horsley, who in his effort to push back the origin of orthodox dogma as far as possible, asserted that the Jews in Christ's day believed in the doctrine of the Trinity, that they expected the second Person of the

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[75] *Letters to the Jews*, XX, 254-55.

[76] *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 41-42.

Trinity as their Messiah, and that they gave up this opinion when the Christians applied it to Christ.[77] Priestley was also correct in maintaining against Price that Arianism was no older than the age of Arius himself, as well as in attributing much of the course of Christological development to the impact of Hellenistic, or, in his overly simple designation, "Platonic" ideas. Also, of course, most biblical scholars today share his doubt about the historicity of the nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke.

To equate development with corruption, as Priestley did, may be said to beg a very important question, but the term "corruption" does, at least, convey the notion of an original nucleus from which developments proceed. And he saw, in spite of his bias against certain doctrines and his inability to appreciate the positive side of theological development, that the answers to questions concerning the history of Christian belief must be sought by scientific historical methods and not predetermined by dogmatic presuppositions. He was not so ready to change his opinions on the basis of new evidence as he liked to think,[78] but he acknowledged that such issues are ultimately settled by research. As he wrote in the preface to his _Letters_ _to_ _Dr_. _Horsley_:

> With much tranquillity . . . I shall wait the issue of the present controversy; freely retracting whatever I shall be found to have advanced with too little consideration; moderating any thing on which I shall appear to have laid too much stress.[79]

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[77] Horsley, _op_. _cit_., pp. 42-44.

[78] _Letters_ _to_ _Dr_. _Horsley_, XVIII, 42-43.

[79] _Ibid_., p. 45.

What Priestley failed to see was that it is impossible ever to recover the original nucleus of revelation in all its primitive purity, because revelation is necessarily understood and expressed in the terms and categories of the particular historical culture that receives it. "For we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (II Corinthians 4:7). Knowledge of the intellectual and social environment which historical research gives us can make clearer the early church's understanding of the meaning of the Christ Event, and, for Christians, this understanding, as recorded in Scripture, remains normative because it is chronologically closest to that Event; but no one, no matter how great his historical knowledge of the original circumstances, can give absolute expression to the eternal essence of the Christian revelation, any more than a philosopher can give an absolute definition of Truth. Men are historical beings; their apprehension and expression of truth, even revealed truth, is conditioned by their place in time. Priestley was acute enough to perceive that orthodox Christian doctrine had been conditioned by changing cultural circumstances, and his efforts to discover these circumstances and their influence shed light upon the development of doctrine; but he erred in assuming that somehow one could escape the limitations of his time and define, once for all, the pure essence of Christianity. He was himself aware of this insofar as he always refused to commit himself to any one creed, asking, "And can we think wisdom will die with us?"[80] But he failed to see that the belief in the intellectual limits of each cultural era, which is implied in this insistence upon continuing openness to future change, was inconsistent with his conviction that men would eventually recover "pure" Christianity.

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[80] An Essay on the First Principles of Government, and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty, including Remarks on Dr. Brown's Code of Education [1768], and on Dr. Balguy's Sermon on Church Authority [1771], XXII, 126.

CHAPTER II

MATERIALISM AND NECESSITY

1. Materialism

In 1775 Priestley published *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind with Introductory Essays on the Principle of the Association of Ideas*.[1] This was an abbreviated version of David Hartley's *Observations on Man*, which had appeared in 1749, and which Priestley considered to be "among the greatest efforts of human genius."[2] Priestley had first read the book while a student at Daventry and found it to be a

> performance, which immediately engaged my closest attention, and produced the greatest, and in my opinion, the most favourable effect on my turn of thinking through life. It established me in the belief of the doctrine of Necessity, which I first learned from Collins;[3] it greatly improved that disposition to piety which I brought to the academy, and freed it from the rigour with which it had been tinctured.[4]

Hartley's combination of scientific daring and devout Christian faith placed him in what Basil Willey calls "the apostolical succession of English physico-theologians from Bacon, through Boyle, Locke, and Newton,"[5] who pioneered in scientific research, but who remained confident that they were only establishing morality and religion more firmly. Priestley entered eagerly into the succession, finding in Hartley's explanation of human behavior a scientific foundation for his own system which embraced a materialistic view of human nature, a deterministic view of human action, and, of course, a Unitarian theology.

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[1] *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind*, III, 167-96.

[2] *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, II, 257.

[3] *Supra*, p. 165.

[4] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Memoirs and Correspondence 1733-1787*, I, Part I, 24.

In the first part of _Observations on Man_ Hartley, following out suggestions in the work of Newton, Locke, and John Gay, argued that all the operations of the human mind can be attributed to the working of the principle of "association" upon sensations, "those internal feelings of the mind, which arise from the impressions made by external objects upon several parts of our bodies."[6] According to his theory, these sensations constitute the basic units of all mental phenomena, and the laws governing their association account for all our ideas, ranging from the simplest, which are merely "images" of sensations, to the most complex conceptions, which are coalescences of simpler ideas.[7] In addition, Hartley used the principle of association to explain both voluntary and involuntary muscular movements, the operation of the five senses, as well as the emotions, moral sense, memory, and imagination--in short, the whole of man's mental life.[8]

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[5] Willey, _op. cit._, p. 136.

[6] Hartley, _op. cit._, Part I, p. ii.

[7] _Ibid._, chap. I, secs. 1-2, pp. 5-84.

[8] _Ibid._, sec. 3; chaps. 2-4; pp. 85-499.

Hartley supplemented his use of the principle of association by offering a description, admittedly speculative,[9] of the mechanism of sensation. Its significant feature was the suggestion of a strictly physical cause for all human behavior, including thought. All bodies, he argued, give off vibrations which are transmitted by means of aether ("a very subtle and elastic fluid" which surrounds all "gross bodies"[10]) to the nerves which, in turn, transmit the vibrations to the brain.[11] These motions in the brain always accompany the sensations which arise in the mind; and the fainter miniature vibrations, or "vibratiuncles," which linger on for a time in the brain after the object causing the original vibrations is removed, always accompany ideas.[12]

The implication of Hartley's theory was that one could give a strictly physiological account of human psychology by declaring mental states to be simply movements in the brain, but Hartley himself shied away from such a conclusion. Instead, he was content to note a parallelism between brain and mind in which the vibrations and vibratiuncles in the former correspond respectively to the sensations and ideas in the latter. The mind, or soul, he believed, was immaterial and independent of the brain, and he suggested that perhaps an "intermediate body" accounted for the correlation of brain movement with mental activity.[13]

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[9] Ibid., Part I, p. 72.

[10] Ibid., p. 13.

[11] Ibid., pp. 21-25.

[12] Ibid., pp. 56-64.

When Priestley republished the Observations he omitted the description of the theory of vibrations, as well as the theological portions of the book, not because he considered them wrong, but in order to allow Hartley's treatment of the principle of association to stand forth more clearly.[14] In one of his own "introductory essays" he noted that because many persons still think of matter "in the most gross and general manner," they will find it hard to believe what the theory of vibrations suggests, that "so much of the business of thinking" should depend upon the "mere matter" of the brain; nevertheless, the latest scientific researches indicate that the nature of matter is so complex that one must

> be prepared to admit the possibility of a mass of matter, like the brain, having been formed by the Almighty Creator with such exquisite powers, with respect to vibrations, as should be sufficient for [producing all our ideas] .[15]

He then went on to dismiss as encumbrances Hartley's insistence upon the immateriality of the mind or soul and his postulation of an intermediate substance between this immaterial principle and the brain. Rather, he suggested, it seems more likely that

> the whole man is of some uniform composition, and that the property of perception, as well as the other powers that are

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[13] Ibid., pp. 511-12.

[14] Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, III, 169.

[15] Ibid., pp. 180-81.

> termed *mental*, is the result (whether necessary or not) of such an organical structure as that of the brain.[16]

No one, he maintained, need be concerned by such a materialistic view of man, except those whose belief in a future life depends upon the immateriality of the soul. Those who hold to the Christian doctrine of resurrection will not be alarmed.[17]

The outcry raised by these remarks, Priestley wrote in his *Memoirs*, "can hardly be imagined. In all the newspapers, and most of the periodical publications, I was represented as an unbeliever in revelation, and no better than an Atheist."[18] Further study only convinced him of the correctness of his suggestion, and two years later he offered to the public a fuller statement of his position, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*.[19] Its purpose was to demonstrate that materialism was supported by the latest scientific findings, by logic, and by Scripture, and to give an historical account of how the "heathen" doctrine of an immaterial soul has corrupted true Christianity.[20] The ultimate aim of the book was, of course, apologetic, written in the hope that

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[18] *Memoirs of Dr. J. Priestley* in *Life and Correspondence 1787-1804*, I, Part II, 202-03.

[19] *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. To Which is Added, The History of the Philosophical Doctrine concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; with its Influence on Christianity, especially with respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-existence of Christ* [1777], III, 197-446.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 208, 209, 219.

> some unbelievers, of a philosophical turn of mind, . . . finding the true system of revelation to be quite another thing than they had imagined it to be, and infinitely more *consonant to the real appearances of nature*, may think it worth their while to consider it in various *other lights*, and attend to the *evidence* that others and myself have produced in favour of it; and so from being infidels . . . they may become rational Christians.[21]

No doubt he particularly had in mind those who, like d'Holbach in his *Système de la Nature* (1770), maintained that atheism was the logical corollary of a thoroughgoing materialism. In fact, Priestley himself admitted that the *Système de la Nature* "is the most plausible and seducing of any thing that I have yet met with in support of atheism."[22]

Priestley first discussed the nature of matter itself in order to show that, contrary to common opinion and superficial appearance, it is not impenetrable and inert, but a penetrable substance possessing the powers of attraction and repulsion. These powers are the causes of its apparent solidity. Even matter's ultimate components are not hard particles, but points or centers of force which are surrounded by alternate spheres of attraction and repulsion. Priestley acknowledged his debt for this theory to Ruggerio Boscovich, a Dalmatian Jesuit, who gave his views on the subject in *Theoria Philosophiae Naturalis* (1758),[23] and to a fellow countryman and friend, John Michell, both of whom, Priestley says, arrived at the same theory independently of each other, and whose findings he had described earlier in his *History and Present State of Discoveries relating to Vision, Light, and Colours*.[24]

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[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 203-04.

[22] *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part I, IV, 389.

[23] See Roger Joseph Boscovich, *A Theory of Natural Philosophy. Latin-English Edition from the Text of the first Venetian Edition, published under the personal Superintendence of the Author in 1763. With a short life of Boscovich*, ed. and trans. by J. M. Child (Chicago: Open Court Co., 1922).

Such a view of matter as active and subtile, whose essence is power rather than inert mass, removed, Priestley believed, the "odium" of sluggishness and impenetrability which had hitherto prevented acceptance of matter as capable of thought and sensation. Now, with this new understanding, "the whole argument for an immaterial thinking principle in man . . . falls to the ground,"[25] and with it, of course, the corrupt religious doctrine of an immaterial soul. The powers of sensation or perception, and thought, he pointed out, "have never been found but in conjunction with a certain *organized system of matter*," namely, the brain; nor is there any instance of a person retaining capacity for thought when the brain is destroyed. In fact, so far as we can determine, anything that affects the brain affects thought and sensation, and vice-versa. Since it is generally agreed that whatever universally accompanies a particular phenomenon has a necessary connection to it, and since one ought to avoid postulating more causes for a thing than are necessary to account for it, the most reasonable conclusion would seem to be that "the seat of the sentient principle in man, is the material substance of the brain."[26]

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[24] London, 1772, pp. 390-94.

[25] *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, III, 230.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 242-45.

Such a position eliminates many of the difficulties which attend belief in an immaterial principle in man. One need wonder no longer about what becomes of the soul during sleep, swoons, or after death, or what was its condition before it united with the body, or when the union took place. One need not labor to explain how the soul or mind is present in the body, or how two wholly different substances, mind and matter, or soul and body, can enter into any sort of relationship with one another. How much simpler it is to admit what is consistent with all our observations,

> that the power of thinking belongs to the *brain* of a man, as that of walking to his feet, or that of speaking to his tongue; that, therefore, man, who is *one being*, is composed of *one kind of substance*, made of the *dust of the* earth.[27]

A materialist view of man is also perfectly consistent with Scripture.[28] If man does consist of two parts, matter and spirit, and if, as is commonly asserted, the spiritual, or immaterial, part is the more important, surely there would have been express mention of it, and yet one finds only "a most remarkable silence on the subject of the immateriality of the human soul in these sacred books."[29] Many passages support the opinion that man is a psychosomatic unity.[30] The description of the creation of man in Genesis 2:7 states that the *whole* man was made of the dust of the ground and that he became alive when enabled to breathe. The biblical word which is translated as "soul" (*nephesh* in the Old Testament; *psuchē* in the New Testament) is used to signify the whole man, and, in some places, clearly only corporeal mortal man, as, for example in Ezekiel 18:4, "The soul that sinneth it shall die"; and Luke 12:20, "Thou fool, this night thy soul [thy life] shall be required of thee." Neither does the Bible support the notion of an immaterial and immortal principle which survives the destruction of the body. Rather, it emphasizes the death of the whole man and his future resurrection.[31] In Genesis 3:19, for example, Adam is told that he is dust and that to dust he shall return. Psalm 6:5 declares, "In death there is no remembrance of thee. In the grave who shall give thee thanks?" Job speaks to the point fully and distinctly (14:7-12) when he contrasts a tree's power of renewal with the totality of man's end, and then expresses his yearning for a future resurrection (14:13-15; 19:25-27). In the many death accounts of Old Testament heroes there is no suggestion that only the body is dead while the soul lives on. The descriptions of resurrections, as of the children by Elijah and Elisha, of Lazarus, of others by the apostles, and of Jesus himself, make no mention of an immaterial soul, but only of the death and resurrection of the whole person.[32] Jesus' apparent distinction between soul and body, as in Matthew 10:28, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him, which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell," is meant to contrast this life (the "body") when men control us, with the life to come (the "soul") when God will rule. Paul declares that if Christ did not rise from the dead, then all who have died in Christian faith have perished and, therefore, men had best live in undisciplined pursuit of the pleasures of the day (I Corinthians 15:12-18, 32). Yet how could he have reasoned in such fashion if he thought that the soul survived the body? His own writings, not to mention the book of Revelation, are filled with references to a future general resurrection. Priestley summarizes his findings by observing that

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[27] *Ibid*., pp. 252-76. In answer to the objection that if man is wholly material, then God's nature must also be material, Priestley argues that, in the first place, the divine nature manifests properties which man does not possess--omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience--so that no proof of man's materiality can be extended analogously to God's being. On the other hand, Scripture, while ascribing to God the qualities just mentioned, nowhere describes him as immaterial, but only as a spirit, that is, an invisible power, and this invisibility is never attributed to his immateriality, but to his splendor. Indeed, if one defines matter in terms of power and as capable of thought, there is no reason why one cannot think of God as material, since matter understood in this sense is conceivably quite consistent with the attributes of perfect wisdom, power, and goodness which inspire our worship. Such a view also provides a more cogent explanation of the divine ubiquity and activity by defining God as that power which is the source of every other power, a view which avoids the difficulty of explaining how an immaterial being can affect an impenetrable and inert substance. (*Ibid*., pp. 241, 296-302, 216-23.) Still, Priestley admits whatever terms we may use to describe the Divine nature, we can never conceive it adequately. "God is, and ever must remain, the incomprehensible." (*Ibid*., p. 299).

[28] *Ibid*., pp. 304-15.

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[29] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

[30] Modern biblical scholarship supports Priestley on this point. See Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (eds.), *The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 3.

[31] Modern scholarship also supports Priestley on this point. See B. W. Anderson, *Rediscovering the Bible* (New York: Association Press, 1951), pp. 210-16.

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[32] Priestley's own interpretation of the manner of resurrection is that although the body decomposes after death, at the time of the resurrection the same body will be recomposed by its Maker of "those particles that really belonged to the *germ* of the original body" (*Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, III, 332). This means that one's identity will be the same, as well as the original elements which made up the body, but one's form may be radically different. Such a view, Priestley believes, coincides with Paul's analogy to the seed which revives after being sown in the earth (I Corinthians 15:35-38).

> persons who attend to the Scriptures cannot avoid concluding, that the operations of the soul depend upon the body, and that between death and the resurrection there will be a suspension of all its powers. And it is obvious to remark that if this be the fact . . . there is fair ground to presume, that the soul cannot be that independent being that has been imagined.[33]

How, then, did the doctrine of an immaterial, immortal soul become a part of Christianity? Priestley's answer, which foreshadows his treatment of Christology and other "corruptions" in *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, is that since the idea is foreign to the Scriptures, it must have originated from heathen sources; however, it gradually gained ground among Christians because it seemed to make their apologetic labor easier. Primitive man attributed the power of thought to some part of his body--the heart or the bowels--and the power of life to his breath or blood. Further reflection led him to conclude that possibly thought and life were properties of a single thing, and that this most probably was the breath. Thus originated the earliest notion of the soul, "an aerial or igneous substance, which animates the body during life, and makes its escape at death."[34] At length, of course, men learned that breath is only air, but the notion of an invisible principle of life and thought was too firmly fixed to be dismissed, and philosophers assumed the soul "to be a substance more attenuated and refined,"[35] but still possessing some properties in common with matter, such as extension and local presence. This view of the soul as a highly attenuated form of matter distinct from the body was developed by the philosophers of classical Greece, especially Plato, and was the prevailing view throughout the Hellenistic world by the beginning of the Christian era. It is significant that no Christian writer spoke of the soul until the former Platonic philosopher Justin Martyr, and even he and later Fathers who adopted the notion retained the idea that it was, in some sense, material. The belief that the soul is strictly immaterial is quite modern, dating back only to Descartes, who denied that it possessed extension or relation to place.[36]

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[33] *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, III, 310.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 371.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

Christian thinkers adopted the doctrine of a soul distinct from the body because it enabled them to meet the two greatest objections made by unbelievers. The stumbling block of affirming a crucified man as Savior of the world could be overcome by claiming for him a pre-existent divine soul which had dwelt only temporarily in the body of Jesus and which was untouched by the sufferings on the cross. The apparently incredible doctrine of a resurrection of flesh and blood could be made more acceptable by shifting to the popular notion of an immortal soul whose existence is not terminated by bodily death.[37]

But the advantages of incorporating such a doctrine into Christianity were far outweighed by the disadvantages. We have already discussed in the last chapter what Priestley believed to be the deplorable theological and moral consequences resulting from the exaggeration of the person of Christ into a pre-existent God. The change from belief in a resurrection to that of the soul surviving the body also burdened Christianity, Priestley maintained, with a doctrine which cannot be supported by either reason or Scripture. It is true, Priestley admitted, that nature gives no evidence for a future life of any kind; it is for precisely this reason that a special revelation was necessary.[38] But whereas

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[36] _Ibid_., pp. 352-69.

[37] _Ibid_., p. 405.

> the resurrection of the whole man, at some distant period . . . [has been] sufficiently confirmed to us, both by the evident tokens of a divine commission attending the persons who delivered the doctrine, and especially by the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is more authentically attested than any other fact in history,

there is no authority or evidence whatever for the immortality of the soul.[39]

The doctrine of an immaterial principle in man has also had, according to Priestley, a bad effect upon morality. Its logical implication is that matter is inferior because it is incapable of thought and immortality, and that therefore the human body is an object of indifference or contempt. The result has been to encourage a life of either unrestrained sensuality, as manifested by the licentiousness of many early heretics, or its opposite, excessive asceticism, with its glorification of celibacy, fasting, and self-flagellation. Yet such an attitude toward matter and the body has no place in Scripture. Genesis 1:31 declares that "God saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was very good." The doctrine of the resurrection is itself diametrically opposed to any view which degrades matter.[40]

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[38] _Supra_, pp. 76-78.

[39] _Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit_, III, 386.

Priestley finishes his list of the corrupting consequences which have followed upon the introduction into Christianity of the notion of an immortal and immaterial soul by noting that it is also responsible for the "Popish doctrines of *purgatory* and the *worship of* the dead."[41]

He concludes:

> When to all these gross corruptions of Christianity, we add the doctrine of the *Trinity*, with all its consequences . . . I should think that a plain Christian would rejoice in being able to throw off the whole immense load (which must otherwise sink the belief of it) by the easy supposition of *matter being capable of the property of sensation or thought*; an opinion which is so far from being contradicted by any appearance in nature, that it is perfectly agreeable to them all, and peculiarly favored by the whole system of Revelation.[42]

2. *Necessity*

Priestley believed that the doctrine of necessity followed as logically from materialism as did a Unitarian Christology. The three principles were "equally parts of *one system*, . . . and . . . whoever shall duly consider their *connexion*, and *dependence on one another*, will find no sufficient consistency in any general scheme of principles, that does not comprehend them all."[43] Anthony Collins' *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*, which he first read while a student at Daventry, converted Priestley to "necessitarianism" and his reading of Hartley's Observations on Man at about the same time confirmed his belief.[44] In 1777, the same year in which Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit appeared, Priestley published an "appendix" to that work, The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated, in which he attacked the notion of free will and urged a strictly mechanistic view of the workings of the mind.

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[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 439-45.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 445.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 446.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

He begins by attempting to define clearly his own use of terms in hopes of removing the confusion which, he believes, is chiefly responsible for the reluctance of many persons to accept the necessitarian viewpoint. "Liberty" he defines as the power which man possesses to think or do whatever he wills within, of course, the limits of his nature. The will itself, however, is not free, but is, like everything else in nature, determined by some external cause, this being in the will's case the strongest motive presented to it. Motives themselves result from two factors: the objects which are present to the mind and the previous disposition of the mind toward those objects. This means, Priestley contends, that even on separate occasions a man will make exactly the same choice if his state of mind and the external circumstances are the same. This "constant determination of mind, according to the motives presented to it" is his definition of necessity.[45]

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[44] Being an Appendix to the Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated [1777], III, 457.

[45] Ibid., pp. 459-62.

To maintain that the mind may choose different alternatives in identical circumstances is to assert that there may be an effect without a cause, which is not only contrary to what even the most devout libertarian believes about the course of nature, but also destroys the principal argument for the existence of God, the argument from a designing First Cause, for if anything, even a single thought, can arise without an adequate cause, the universe may likewise exist without one.[46] Liberty in this sense also removes the basis for belief in Divine Providence and in prophecy because both depend upon divine foreknowledge and divine foreordination, and these are made impossible if there are events left contingent upon human self-determination.[47]

Priestley's denial of free will follows from his mechanistic understanding of the mind. Hartley had accounted for all human behavior by means of laws of association, and although he was reluctant to give up the notion of the mind's immateriality, he admitted that the doctrine of necessity was a logical consequence of his theory.[48] Priestley agreed, and re-enforced the inevitability of such a conclusion by his assertion that thought is a strictly mechanical process produced by vibrations in the material substance of the brain.[49] The will, in this view, is not a separate faculty, but an "affection of the mind," which, like all other mental operations, originates in a mechanical motion of the brain. This motion arises from sense perceptions of external objects and actions which, through a chain of associations, excite, in the case of objects, either desire or aversion, or, in the case of actions, praise or blame. But these positive and negative inclinations derive from a yet more fundamental source: the elemental sensations of pleasure and pain. Until the mind has been affected with a sense of either pleasure or pain, all objects are equally indifferent to it; but some, because pleasure always accompanies them, become objects of desire and approval, while others, always accompanied by pain, become objects of aversion. Thus, the doctrine of association, which holds that ideas often occurring together will afterwards introduce each other, here provides a completely sufficient account of the formation of the affections of the mind, or motives, which determine volitions.[50]

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[46] *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, III, 462-70.

[47] *Ibid*., pp. 470-72.

[48] Hartley, *op. cit.*, Preface, p. vi; Part I, pp. 500-11.

[49] *Supra*, pp. 224-27.

The will is, therefore, the mind as it approves and desires, or rejects and condemns, prior to the consequent physical action. If there is a lengthy interval between a desire and its fulfillment, we have time to become aware of what we call "willing," and therefore designate the action "voluntary"; but when fulfillment is immediate, we call the action "automatic." In the former case, however, the process is also, strictly speaking, automatic, or mechanical. The only difference is that it takes longer to complete.[51]

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[50] *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, III, 472-77.

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 477-80.

Priestley concludes "that the determinations of what we call the will are, in fact, nothing more than a particular case of the general doctrine of the association of ideas, and, therefore, a perfectly mechanical [and hence necessary] thing."[52]

Also like Hartley, Priestley believed that the doctrine of necessity provided the basis for an unlimited optimism. Since the author of the unbroken chain of cause and effect, of which man is only a part, is a benevolent God, the final result can only be "most glorious and happy." No matter what men do, "all their designs, and all their actions, are subject to the secret influence and guidance of One who is necessarily the best judge of what will most promote his own excellent purposes."[53]

But how is one to reconcile such a claim with the existence of evil and suffering? Priestley's answer is the familiar one that evil is only apparent and that all suffering is salutary. We may be inclined to think otherwise because of our limited perspective, but there are sufficient indications of divine benevolence to convince the thoughtful that all is ultimately for the best.

> This world, we see, is an admirable _nursery for great minds_. Difficulties, opposition, persecution, and evils of every other form, are the necessary instruments by which they are made, and even _the captain of our salvation_ was himself _made perfect through suffering_. A mixture of pleasing events does, likewise, contribute to the same end; but of the due proportions in this mixture we are no judges. Considering, however, in whose hands are the several ingredients of the _cup_ of mortal life, we may be

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[52] _Ibid_., p. 477.

[53] _Ibid_., p. 450.

> assured that it will never be more bitter than will be necessary to make it, in the very highest degree, salutary . . .
>
> With this persuasion we cannot but consider every *being*, and every *thing*, in a favourable light. Every person with whom we have any connexion is a *friend*, and every event in life is a *benefit*.[54]

Priestley could still make the same affirmation after the Birmingham Riots of 1791 brought the destruction of his home, library, and laboratory.[55] In a posthumously published discourse originally intended for delivery at Philadelphia, he declared that a truly pious person will not pick up a newspaper "without reflecting that he is going to see what God has wrought; and . . . is apparently about to work. To him . . . all news is good news."[56]

The necessarian will also, Priestley asserted in this treatise, incline toward belief in universalism. It may be that the wicked will simply serve their earthly purpose of disciplining the righteous, and then be annihilated, but it seems more likely that a system directed by a benevolent God will terminate in the "everlasting ultimate happiness of all."[57]

But does not the doctrine of necessity destroy any notion of man's moral responsibility and therefore encourage indolence, if not vice? It was this question which most troubled Richard Price, whose letters to him on the subject Priestley published, together with his replies, in 1778.[58] Priestley had already attempted to meet this objection in his original treatise.[59] In the first place, he argued, a man's decisions and actions are his own, regardless of what causes them, so it is perfectly proper to hold him accountable for them, even if the force determining his conduct originates from without. Secondly, we hold a person responsible for his conduct on the assumption that the praise or blame we give will provide motives which will affect his future actions, yet this disciplinary practice is rendered useless if his will is free to act independent of motives. Moreover, recognition of the truth of necessitarianism is highly conducive to virtue. One who adopts such a view will find hatred, malice, and envy impossible because he will consider that each person is, and is doing, exactly what the Creator intended. Piety grows because the necessitarian perceives God, the great First Cause, at work in everything.

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[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 450-51.

[55] *An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham*, Part I [1791], Part II [1792], XIX, 422-26.

[56] "On the Duty of Mutual Exhortation," in *Four Discourses Intended to Have Been Delivered at Philadelphia* [1806], XVI, 424.

[57] *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, III, 514-15. See also *supra*, pp. 72-73, 174-75.

In his subsequent correspondence with Price, Priestley confessed that perhaps it would be better to drop the use of such terms as "praiseworthy" and "blameworthy" in order to avoid confusion. To speak in a way consistent with the doctrine of necessity one should, instead of describing someone as praiseworthy, say that he has acted from motives which will contribute to his own happiness and that of others, and, therefore, he should be happy; or, instead of describing someone as blameworthy, one should say that he has acted from motives which will cause unhappiness to himself and others, and, therefore, he should be made unhappy for the sake of the general happiness. But whether the traditional language is used or not, the meaningfulness of moral discipline will remain, which is all that is important. Besides, if common language is in some respects inconsistent with necessitarianism, it is even more inconsistent with the notion that we are free to act without regard to motives.[60]

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[58] A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, in a Correspondence between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley, to which are added, by Dr. Priestley, an Introduction, Explaining the Nature of the Controversy, and Letters to Several Writers who have animadverted on his Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit, or his Treatise on Necessity [1778], IV, 1-164.

[59] The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, III, pp. 485-509.

Priestley, of course, provides scriptural authority for his doctrine.[61] He points to the many passages which speak of God as the cause of human thoughts and deeds, both good and evil, yet without suggesting the need of any special divine interposition.

> Many particular events, which were wholly brought about by . . . men, are said to be expressly appointed by God; and even the very temper and disposition by which the agents were actuated, are said to be inspired by God . . . At the same time, however, it appears, from the circumstances of the history, that there was no proper interposition of the Divine Being in the case, no real miracle, but every thing took place according to the common established course of nature; since what those . . . persons did may easily be accounted for on principles by which men are actuated every day.[62]

He admits that the sacred writers were not, strictly speaking, necessarians, "for they were not philosophers, not even our Saviour himself, as far as appears," but their habitual piety "naturally led them to refer all things to God, without reflecting on the rigorous meaning of their language." Such a viewpoint is, in any case, "utterly irreconcileable" with the doctrine of free will.[63]

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[60] A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, IV, 73-74.

[61] The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, III, 524-32.

[62] Ibid., p. 525.

One might think that in light of all this, Priestley would have been favorably inclined toward the doctrine of predestination, but, on the contrary, he took pains to distinguish necessitarianism from it.[64] The only point on which the two theories agree is that God foreknows and foreordains man's final destiny. But whereas according to necessitarianism all human actions are predetermined through a regular chain of cause and effect, predestination teaches that one may undergo a "new birth" by God's miraculous interposition, and although ultimate salvation is thereby assured, one is free in the interim to act as he chooses. Such a view is more akin to the notion of fate held by ancient pagans, who,

> though they had an idea of the certainty of the final event of some things, . . . had no idea of the necessary connexion of all the preceding means to bring about the designed end; and least of all had they any just idea of the proper _mechanism of the mind_ depending upon the certain influences of _motives to determine_ the will, by means of which the whole series of events, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things, makes one connected _chain of causes and effects_, originally established by the Deity.[65]

Moreover, predestination is also associated with such doctrines as eternal punishment for the wicked, the penal substitution theory of the atonement, the total depravity of infants, inherited guilt, and, except in the case of Supralapsarianism, the freedom of Adam before the fall. None of these doctrines accompany necessitarianism, which allows no exceptions to the law of necessity, even in the case of Adam; repudiates eternal suffering by asserting that everything is under the direction of a benevolent God; and has no need to maintain that men are born hopelessly evil or that the second person of the Trinity must die in their stead.[66]

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[63] _Ibid._, p. 526.

[64] _Ibid._, pp. 534-40.

[65] _Ibid._, p. 455.

In An History of the Corruptions of Christianity Priestley maintained that the doctrine of predestination did not become an article of Christian belief until Augustine advanced it against the Pelagians. Certain passages of Scripture, notably in Paul's letters, might appear to support it, but the general tenor of the sacred writers is to attribute all things to God, rather than to limit his control, as predestinarians do, to those events that produce salvation. Moreover, the moral exhortations which fill Scripture are rendered pointless if, according to predestination, God is the immediate cause of every virtuous act; whereas, the doctrine of necessity, by making motives the immediate cause of action, and God only the secondary cause, justifies efforts at moral influence.[67]

Augustine was the first to make the doctrine of predestination a part of Christianity, as well as the concepts of inherited guilt and total depravity, but even his great authority could not make them prevail. Modified versions of Pelagianism, with its emphasis upon earning merit, continued to survive in the Western church, and Augustinianism made virtually no progress in the East. The one most responsible for imposing the system upon Protestantism was Martin Luther, who acknowledged his debt to Augustine, and whose hatred for the evil of indulgences, which the Roman church based upon the doctrine of merit,

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[66] In the preface to An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy Priestley notes approvingly Jonathan Edwards' Freedom of the Will (1754), but laments his association of "the philosophical doctrine of necessity with the gloomy notions of Calvin" (An Examination of the Scotch Philosophy, III, 8).

[67] An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, V, 156-59.

> unhappily led him and others so far in the opposite extreme, that from his time the doctrines of grace, original sin, and predestination, have been generally termed the *doctrines of the Reformation*, and every thing that does not agree with them has been termed *popish*, and branded with other opprobrius epithets.[68]

Considering Luther's background and the situation that he confronted, it was not to be expected that he should have begun his reformation on "more liberal principles," but, says Priestley, it is an outstanding case of the fact that "as good generally comes out of evil, so sometimes, and for a season at least, evil arises out of good."[69]

The "essential difference" between necessitarianism and predestination, Priestley claims, is the former's superior moral tendency. The necessarian believes that men's conduct is determined by their motives, and thus, by the proper manipulation of circumstances, one can produce morally better men even more certainly than a farmer, using the proper methods, can produce a better crop. In contrast, the system of predestination, which attributes moral conduct to the immediate agency of God, operates "as an axe at the root of all virtue and goodness" by discouraging human efforts at improvement.[70]

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[68] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[69] *Ibid.*

Because his necessitarianism led him to believe that circumstances were the immediate creators of human character, Priestley was profoundly concerned about the institutions which principally determine man's social and intellectual environment: church, state, and school. We shall discuss his views on church and state in the next chapter. Here we may note that he wrote two treatises on educational theory in addition to devoting much of his time to the classroom.[71] He is credited with formally introducing modern history, economics, and political theory into English higher education (while at Warrington Academy) sixty years before there was a chair of economics at Oxford, and more than a hundred years before modern history became a separate school.[72] Such studies were needed, he believed, to equip "gen~~tl~~emen who are designed to fill the principal stations of active life, distinct from those which are adopted to the learned professions."[73] We have already emphasized how much importance he attributed to the study of history.[74] In the light of his psychological theory it now becomes clearer why he was so confident that historical study "strengthens the sentiments of virtue." By portraying the pleasure which ultimately follows virtue and the pain which ultimately follows vice, history provides the student with additional motives to virtue.

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[70] The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, III, 534-35.

[71] An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education, XXIV, 7-25, 439-63; Miscellaneous Observations Relating to Education, XXV, 3-80.

[72] Holt, op. cit., p. 30.

[73] An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education, XXIV, 7.

[74] Supra, pp. 124-31.

But the question remains whether Priestley's mechanistic and deterministic view of man is logically consistent with moral responsibility. If every human action is determined by an unbreakable chain of cause and effect reaching back to God, it is difficult to see how one can find a place for moral striving or find meaning in moral exhortations. Whether God is the immediate cause, or employs "secondary causes" does not seem to make any logical difference. Whatever is, is, and whatever will be, will be. Efforts at change are futile; judgments are pointless.

Moreover, a strictly materialist psychology always confronts a serious logical difficulty, which has been nicely stated by C. E. M. Joad.

> Thoughts, the materialist asserts, occur, as bodily events occur, because of certain predisposing causes [at work within the body] . . . A thought, then, so far as its causation is concerned, is on the same footing as a bodily event. Now it would be meaningless to ask whether a bodily event, for example, the state of my blood pressure or the temperature of my skin, was true. These are things which occur and are real; they are facts. But they are not and cannot be true, because they do not assert anything other than themselves. It is, then, on this basis equally meaningless to say of a thought that it is true; we can say only that it occurs. In so far as it indicates or is evidence for anything, it indicates or is evidence for a condition of the brain which produced it. The assertions of materialists do not, then, constitute evidence in favour of that which the assertions assert. Nor do their thoughts refer to a reality outside themselves. Their assertions are assertions to the effect that, their thoughts are evidence for the fact that, the bodies and brains of the materialists in question are in a certain condition, and they are evidence for nothing else.
>
> Now, Materialism itself is a set of ideas--a set of ideas which purports among other things to tell us what sort of universe this is in which we are living. But, if Materialism is correct,

> what the ideas do in fact tell us about is the conditions prevailing in the bodies and brains of those who advance them. If, in short, Materialism is true in all that it asserts, then Materialism tells us about that part of the world which is the body and brain of a particular individual, and only about that part. It follows that Materialism, in so far as it purports to give an account of the world as a whole cannot be true, or, more precisely, it is meaningless to say of it that it is either true or false, since it turns out that it does not tell us anything about the world at all. Thus in so far as it establishes its conclusion, Materialism destroys its case.[75]

In short, a materialist psychology like Priestley's, in so far as it establishes the conclusions it asserts, denies those conclusions any possibility of being judged true, because every thinker is completely enclosed within the circle of his own mechanical thought processes.

But even one as critical of materialism as Joad concedes that in modern scientific thought "matter has become infinitely mysterious and infinitely attenuated."[76] Priestley contended for such a view when the idea of matter as inert and impenetrable was still widespread, and he rightly discerned that to conceive of man's nature as material, if matter is as he understood it to be, is not inconsistent with the biblical view of man. All this was, of course, part of his effort to reconcile scriptural revelation with the latest intellectual advances.

A similar concern inspired Priestley's enthusiastic espousal of the doctrine of necessity. As Basil Willey puts it:

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[75] C. E. M. Joad, _Guide to Philosophy_ (New York: Dover Publications, 1936), pp. 535-36.

[76] _Ibid._, p. 528.

> To accept Necessity meant to accept the scientific view of the universe; it meant the acceptance of those unalterable laws which preserve the stars from wrong, and the rejection of superstition and the supernatural. It was therefore indispensable to all who entertained "enlightened and just" views of Nature.[77]

By emphasizing the certain effect of prearranged circumstances upon human character Priestley, at the cost of some logical consistency, was able to use the doctrine of necessity to encourage the reform of educational, political, and religious institutions. However, his explanation for the strange fact that many believers in predestination are not discouraged from the pursuit of virtue would seem to apply equally to his own situation with regard to necessitarianism:

> If there be in our minds a *prevalence* of *good principles* and good dispositions, we naturally turn our eyes from everything in our respective systems that, even by a just construction, is unfavorable to virtue and goodness, and we reflect with pleasure, and act upon those parts of them only that have a good tendency.[78]

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[77] Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

[78] *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, III, 538.

CHAPTER III

CHURCH AND STATE

1. First Principles

Priestley's understanding of the state was an extension of his view of man and Divine Providence. Man, he believed, is part of a great world mechanism which is in the process of fulfilling the benevolent designs of its Creator, and, therefore, "whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisiacal, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive."[1] The principal means by which Divine Providence is bringing mankind toward this inevitable state of perfection is "society, and consequently, government"; therefore, the latter's proper ordering is of primary importance.[2] Why men should concern themselves with the state, since God determines all for the best anyway, is not explained by Priestley. Instead, he uses the necessarian doctrine that all human behavior is determined by circumstances to emphasize the decisive influence which government's ordering of society has upon man's moral and intellectual development.

> Government being the great instrument of this progress of the human species toward this glorious state, that form of

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[1] An Essay on the First Principles of Government, XXII, 9. See also supra, p. 238.

[2] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

> government will have a just claim to our approbation which favours this progress, and that must be condemned in which it is retarded.[3]

Since the fundamental purpose of the state is the welfare of its citizens, "the good and happiness of the members, that is, the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which every thing relating to that state must finally be determined."[4] Priestley felt that previous writers had paid insufficient attention to this utilitarian concept of government's purpose and its implications,[5] so to meet this need he published, in 1768, his first and most systematic treatment of political theory, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*.

A comprehensive description of Priestley's political thought would exceed the bounds of this essay,[6] but at its heart is the distinction between political and civil liberty. Political liberty "*consists in the power which the members of the state reserve to themselves, of arriving at the public offices*, or, at least, *of*

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[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 13. Jeremy Bentham declared that it was Priestley's *Essay* which inspired his doctrine of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." M. P. Mack, *Jeremy Bentham* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 102-03.

[5] But the idea is certainly found in earlier writers, notably, John Locke, *An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government* [London, 1690], paragraph 131, *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume and Rousseau*, ed. Sir Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 108-09.

[6] The best treatment is to be found in Lincoln, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-81.

having votes in the nomination of those who fill them."[7] It is, in short, the right to participate in the functions of government. Civil liberty is "*that power over their own actions, which the members of the state reserve to themselves, and which their officers must not infringe*"[8]--in other words, the free exercise of those natural rights which men do not surrender to the state.

Priestley's primary interest in discussing the nature of political liberty is to provide justification for revolution. Following Locke,[9] he argues that no man can be supposed to give up any of his natural liberty to the state except on the condition that it will contribute to the public good. If the state fails to meet this condition, then its citizens have the right to resume their natural liberty and to depose and punish their rulers, and, if necessary, change their form of government.[10] To the prelate, enjoying a profitable benefice from a corrupt government, who appeals to St. Paul's words in Romans 13:1, "The powers that be are ordained of God," it is sufficient to answer that "the powers which *will be* will be ordained of God also."[11]

Of course, revolution ought not to be undertaken lightly. Some measure of tyranny is inevitable, especially in administering large societies, and those who consider rebellion ought to weigh carefully present evils against "the future evils of a revolt and a temporary anarchy."[12]

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[7] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 11.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Civil Government.*

[10] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 13.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Priestley is more concerned with the power than with the form of government. It is of little consequence, he asserts, "*who* or *how many*, be our governors, or *how long* their office continues, provided their power be the same while they are in office, and the administration be uniform and certain."[13] He quotes from Pope's couplet:

> For forms of government let fools contest;
> Whate'er is best administered is best.
> (*An Essay on Man*, Ep. iii, l. 303)

Nevertheless, since unlimited power readily corrupts those who hold it, a system like England's present one seems best in which Court and Parliament can check one another.[14]

The really important thing is that governmental power be used to guard, and not to destroy, civil liberty. Men surrender a portion of their natural right to do whatever they please in order to enjoy the advantages of cooperation provided by political organization, but they still retain the right to a large measure of individual freedom. The public good, or happiness of the majority, is the test to be used to distinguish those natural rights which must be surrendered to the state from those which may be retained; but because this is frequently difficult to determine *a priori*, political philosophers must rely primarily upon experience to guide them in establishing this proper balance between state control and personal freedom. Since, however, an empirically grounded political science is only in its infancy, the wisest course would seem to be for government to restrict the scope of individual liberty only where there is clear and urgent necessity.[15]

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37. Montesquieu's ideal in *De l'esprit des lois* (2 vols.; Geneva: Barrilot & fils, 1748).

This belief that "it becomes the wisdom of the civil magistracy to take as little upon its hands as possible, and never to interfere, without the greatest caution, in things that do not immediately affect the lives, liberty, or property of the members of the community"[16] stems from Priestley's underlying conviction that the divinely directed process of nature is moving steadily toward man's intellectual and moral perfection; therefore, government should intervene only in those instances in which individual effort has proved insufficient to attain the desired ends. Otherwise, nature should be allowed to take its course. Only in an environment relatively free from restraints can a man's character improve, because it is the sense of liberty that

> gives him a constant feeling of his own power and importance, and is the foundation of his indulging a free, bold, and manly turn of thinking . . . Being free from all fear, he has the most perfect enjoyment of himself, and of all the blessings of life; and his sentiments and enjoyments being raised, his very being is exalted, and the man makes nearer approaches to superior natures.[17]

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[15] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 30-33.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Moreover, lack of the feeling of independence from governmental control slows material progress, because men who doubt whether they and their posterity will be allowed to enjoy the lasting benefits of their labors, are discouraged from attempting to improve their lot.[18]

The two natural rights which, Priestley believed, are the "capital branches" of civil liberty, and which, therefore, ought to be, above all, free of state control, are the rights of education and religion. To prove that they rightfully belong among man's civil liberties it is sufficient to show

> that the advantage we derive from them will be more effectually secured, when they are conducted by individuals, than by the state; and if this can be demonstrated, nothing more is necessary to prove that the civil magistrate has no business to interfere with them.[19]

Priestley's prime target in his attack on government control of education was Dr. John Brown, an Anglican clergyman, who, in several tracts, had proposed the establishment of a state "code of education" designed to instill into tomorrow's citizens the "British system of policy and religion."[20] A basic reason for the triumph of Sparta over Athens was, Brown argued, that the former required its children to be trained by public officials who instilled "the manners, the maxims, the exercises, the toils" which "corresponded with the genius of the state . . . [and] the general welfare," whereas an Athenian father could educate his child however he fancied without regard to the state's wellbeing. Only a rigidly controlled system like Sparta's, he asserted, could save Britain from the immorality and political irresponsibility which destroyed Athens.[21]

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[18] _Ibid._, pp. 37-38.

[19] _Ibid._, p. 40.

[20] _On the Female Character and Education with an Appendix relative to a proposed Code of Education_ [1765], p. 90, quoted in _An Essay on the First Principles of Government_, XXII, 44. See also _Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times_ (2 vols.; London: Printed for L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1757), and _Thoughts on Civil Liberty, Licentiousness, and Faction_ (London: Printed for L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1765).

Priestley responded by pointing out that although Brown's proposal might bring political stability it would be at the price of progress.[22] It is man's capacity for moral and intellectual improvement that distinguishes him from lower animal natures, and to establish a uniform method of education is to eliminate the opportunities for trial and experiment which are essential to advances in the arts and sciences--including advances in the still infant art of education, whose proper goal is not a stagnant tranquillity worthy only of the brute creation, but the formation of ever wiser and more virtuous men. Imagine, he says, the disastrous results if Alfred the Great had imposed upon Oxford for all time the curriculum and teaching methods of his own day, or if a similar thing had been done before the "revival of letters"? It is true that in an atmosphere of unbounded liberty "odd and eccentric" educational methods arise, but, if education is analogous to the manner of advance in other areas of knowledge, then it is from new and seemingly irregular methods that "something extraordinary and uncommonly great will spring." Far better was the varied character of the Athenians which produced such a wealth of cultural achievements than the dreary uniformity of the Spartans. And in the present day, he asks, "Is it not universally considered as an advantage to England, that it contains so great a variety of original characters?"[23]

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[21] _Ibid_., p. 45.

[22] _An Essay on the First Principles of Government_, XXII, 44-48.

Government control of education also runs counter to the great end for which government exists, namely, the public happiness. To deprive parents of the right to rear their children as they desire is to deprive them of one of life's greatest pleasures. The relationships which bring most joy to a man are those with his wife and children; yet these precious relationships may be destroyed if the impersonal power of the state chooses his mate or determines the education of his children.[24]

Finally, the establishment of government control of education will destroy the British constitution with its carefully balanced distribution of power. Whichever part of the government--Commons, Lords, or the Court--selects the teachers and the curriculum will soon produce a citizenry favorable to its own interests, so that "all that opposition . . . which is so salutary in this nation, and so essential to the liberties of England, would be at an end."[25]

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[23] Ibid., p. 47.

[24] Ibid., p. 48.

[25] Ibid., pp. 52-54.

The only warranted conclusion, Priestley argues, is that education is a natural right which ought never to be surrendered to the magistrate, because to do so is to frustrate the very ends for which government exists: the happiness and progress of its citizens.[26]

But the most precious of all civil liberties, Priestley asserts, is freedom of religion.[27] Here, in the words of Basil Willey, we "touch the true mainspring of his libertarian ardour,"[28] for here he speaks not only as one of the Dissenters, whose struggle for religious toleration and freedom in England already had a long and sometimes painful history, but from his overriding concern to free Christianity from the political interference which needlessly hinders the great task of apologetics.

The form of Priestley's arguments for religious liberty is influenced by his desire to refute William Warburton's classic defense of an established church, *The Alliance between Church and State*,[29] and Thomas Balguy's more recent statement of the same position in *A Sermon Preached at Lambeth Chapel*.[30] Both men appealed to utilitarian considerations: government cannot fulfill its purpose, the temporal security of its citizens, without the divine sanctions of morality provided by the church; the church cannot protect itself against external violence without the protection of state power. Priestley accepts utility as the test, but insists that here, as in other cases where the extent of state control is at issue, the safest guide is not *a priori* reasoning, but empirical investigation. Here the evidence is clear. Those societies have enjoyed the most happiness and have been the most flourishing where the civil magistrates have meddled least with religion. For example, Philip II ruined prosperous Flanders by attempting to impose the Inquisition on it, and France was greatly hurt by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes; whereas, England profited from the asylum that she granted to the persecuted. Pennsylvania has flourished more than New England, and England and Holland have also benefited from practicing religious toleration.[31]

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[26] *Ibid*., p. 54.

[27] *Ibid*.

[28] Willey, *op*. *cit*., p. 198.

[29] W. Warburton, *The Alliance between Church and State; or the Necessity and Equity of an Established Religion and a Test Law* [London, 1736] (4th ed. rev.; London: Printed for A. Millar and J. and R. Tonson, 1766).

[30] T. Balguy, *A Sermon Preached at Lambeth Chapel on the Consecration of the Rt. Rev. Jonathan Shipley, D.D., Lord Bishop of Landaff, February 12, 1769* (London: Printed for L. Davis and C. Reymers, 1769).

Contrary to what Warburton and Balguy maintain, an established religion helps neither the state nor the church to achieve its aims. The moral sanctions of religion do encourage obedience to civil law, but when the state gives its support to one particular group of citizens this only creates potentially dangerous hostility among the remainder, whereas if all were protected, all might vie to merit that protection most.[32] Even attempts to suppress opinions which appear to pose a direct threat to social peace, notably atheism and the Roman Catholic assertion that one need not keep faith with heretics, will not protect the state from their influence, because such attempts at suppression only give the steadfast adherents of these opinions an appearance of nobility and make it seem as if it were impossible to refute them on rational grounds.[33] Besides, in "the present advanced state of society," to fear the extravagances of religious zeal manifested by groups like the Anabaptists during the Reformation, the Levellers in the Civil War, and the Assassins of Asia is "absolutely chimerical."[34] Moreover, if secular authority can suppress one set of opinions, there is nothing to prevent it from suppressing any other which may incur its displeasure, and thus gradually destroy all of its citizens' liberties.[35]

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[31] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 55-56.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Priestley acknowledges that in extending toleration to Roman Catholics and atheists he is going beyond his master, Locke,[36] but he insists that Locke would have changed his mind had he known that these limitations would be used to justify that which it was his primary object to prevent: the use of arbitrary power in matters of opinion.[37]

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[33] *Ibid*., pp. 60, 66.

[34] *Ibid*., pp. 57-58.

[35] *Ibid*., p. 61.

[36] See J. Locke, *Epistola de Tolerantia* [Gouda, 1689; translated into English by William Popple, 1689: London] in *John Locke on Education and Politics*, ed. Howard R. Penniman (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1947), pp. 57-58. Priestley remained a staunch defender of toleration for Catholics. In 1780, the year of the Gordon Riots, when many Anglicans and Dissenters joined in calling for the re-enactment of severe penalties against the celebration of mass, the operation of Catholic schools, and Catholic ownership of real property, Priestley published a tract urging Protestants to "adhere to the golden rule of the gospel," considering "how we would wish to be treated in Popish countries" (*A Free Address to Those Who Have Petitioned for the Repeal of the Late Act of Parliament in Favor of the Roman Catholics. By a Lover of Peace and Truth* [1780], XXII, 514-15). He also assured his readers that persecution and despotism are not intrinsic to Roman Catholicism, and that English Catholics in particular have proved themselves to be as just and humane as any of their fellow citizens (*ibid*., 505-08).

Establishment is particularly detrimental to the church. In the first place, religion presupposes the personal responsibility of each individual to God, and to the extent that the state intervenes to compel fulfillment of religious duties, whether these conform to that religion's teaching or not, to that extent it destroys the moral worth before God which the believer derives from performing them voluntarily.

> The purpose and object of religion necessarily suppose _the powers of individuals_, and a responsibility, which is the consequence of those powers; so that the civil magistrate, by taking any of those powers from individuals, and assuming them to himself, doth so far incapacitate them for the duties of religion . . . . As a being capable of immortal life, . . . I must endeavor to render myself acceptable to God, by such dispositions and such conduct as he has required, in order to fit me for future happiness . . . But human establishments, by calling off men's attention from the commandments of God to those of men, tend to defeat the great ends of religion.[38]

Priestley's chief example is that when contributions to the church and to the support of the poor become compulsory, "charity, on which they before subsisted, [is] so far precluded."[39]

Because religion, Priestley insists, and particularly Christianity, is entirely a personal matter between each individual's conscience and his God, and because its ultimate concern is not this transient world, but the eternal life to come, the civil magistrate acts beyond the limits of his office when he attempts to regulate those activities upon which a man's eternal destiny depends.

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[37] _An Essay on the First Principles of Government_, XXII, 63-64.

[38] _Ibid._, pp. 69-70.

[39] _Ibid._, p. 85.

> When this life is over, I shall not be able to claim any of the privileges of an *Englishman*; I shall not be bound by any of the laws of *England*, nor shall I owe any allegiance to its sovereign. When, therefore, my situation in a future life shall have no connexion with my privileges or obligations as an Englishman, why should those persons who make laws for Englishmen interfere with my conduct with respect to a state to which their power does not extend?[40]

Priestley points out that in an "advertisement" prefixed to the *Alliance*, Warburton declared, "It is a trite observation, that divines make bad politicians. I believe it is more generally true, that politicians are but bad divines."[41] Yet, on the grounds of preserving public tranquillity, Warburton and his sympathizers defend the right of the government to enact articles of faith and rules of church discipline. Not only does such state interference fail to contribute to public peace, as already explained, but it also corrupts church doctrines. Civil magistrates, of all people, have, on account of their devotion to worldly concerns, the least time and capacity for judging religious matters; they are incapable of evaluating debated doctrines impartially, because they inevitably favor whichever best suit their political interests.[42] Priestley declares that as low as his opinion is of the early ecclesiastical synods and councils, he "cannot help thinking them more competent judges of articles of Christian faith than any king of England, assisted or not assisted by an English parliament." He only hopes that if these temporal powers should decide to enact any more canons or creeds, that "for the sake of decency, they will purge the two houses of those members who cannot give satisfactory evidence that they are Christians at all."[43] One can only be grateful that they have not decided to protect the bodies of their citizens, in addition to their souls, by establishing thirty-nine articles for physicians.[44]

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[40] *Ibid*., p. 55.

[41] Quoted in *ibid*., p. 83.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 82.

Dependence upon government support also undermines clerical morale and integrity. Not only does such support remove the need for, and, therefore, discourage devotion to one's local pastoral responsibilities, it also tempts the minister to "prevaricate with conscience" by subscribing to beliefs and practices which he inwardly rejects for the sake of a living for himself and his family. The Dissenting minister who relies upon the voluntary contributions of his parishioners may not grow rich, but he retains the precious freedom to obey God rather than man and thereby preserves both a sense of personal integrity and the respect of his people.[45]

Most disadvantageous of all, establishments obstruct the reformation and free debate which are essential to success in the apologetic task. At best they only perpetuate "a more obstinate and blind belief in the vulgar; while men of sense, seeing themselves debarred the very means of conviction must of course be infidels."[46] Just as education and the other arts and sciences require freedom of inquiry, trial, and debate in order to advance, so too, religious truth "can never have a fair chance of being discovered, or propagated," without the same liberty.[47] Whatever utility there may be in an establishment, there is certainly a greater utility in truth, and it is the fundamental objection to all establishments that they "still fix things somewhere" and thereby hinder truth's advance.[48] Look, says Priestley, at the way establishments on the continent have retarded the reformation from Popery; how in both England and Scotland state support preserves the now outdated creeds and politics of sixteenth century Protestantism. Even had the great champions of reform of a half century ago, Locke, Clarke, and Hoadley, drawn up a creed it would today be judged to contain much that was unscriptural.

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[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

[44] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 81. See also *Familiar Letters Addressed to the Inhabitants of Birmingham*, XIX, 189.

[45] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 102-03.

> And can we think that wisdom will die with us? No; our creeds, could we be so inconsistent with ourselves to draw up any, would, I make no doubt, be rejected with equal disdain by our posterity.[49]

In fact, the English clergy's present superiority to that of other national churches, both morally and intellectually, is owing in large part to the constant challenge of the Dissenters--further evidence that freedom, by inspiring competition among opposing parties, is more conducive to truth and virtue than legal enforcement of the status quo.[50] Priestley also points out in a later tract that by shutting the doors of Oxford and Cambridge to Dissenters, the government, instead of husbanding all knowledge for itself, only makes its universities "resemble pools of *stagnant water* secured by dams and mounds," whereas the open Dissenting Academies which have sprung up "are like *rivers*, which, taking their natural course, fertilize a whole country."[51]

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[46] Ibid., p. 138.

[47] Ibid., p. 89.

[48] Ibid., p. 125.

[49] Ibid., p. 126.

Only when defenders of Christianity are free to purge it of inherited corruptions and to develop the most cogent arguments in its favor can they succeed in convincing thoughtful unbelievers. Who can blame a person for rejecting a system of belief whose guardians deny free expression of the opposing arguments? Indeed, in such circumstances, "it would really be an argument of a man's want of spirit, of sense, and even of virtue, to be a believer, because he would believe without sufficient evidence."[52]

Priestley, of course, provides scriptural support for religious liberty. Had Jesus and the disciples believed that it was right of civil magistrates to determine a people's religion, surely they would have made application to the governors of the Jews and

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[50] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[51] *A Letter to the Right Hon. William Pitt, First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, on the Subjects of Toleration and Church Establishments; Occasioned by His Speech Against the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, on Wednesday, the 28th of March, 1787*, XIX, 128. The most thorough description of these academies is in H. McLachlan, *English Education Under the Test Acts* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1931).

[52] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 138.

Romans; yet we find that they preached freely to everyone and only appeared before the magistrates when compelled to do so as criminals. Their entire conduct shows,

> that they considered religion as the proper and immediate concern of every single person, and that there was no occasion whatever to consult or advise with any earthly superior in a case of this nature.[53]

Nor is there any New Testament justification for civil penalties for religious offenses. The most severe punishment directed by Christ in such cases is that the offender be treated as a "heathen and publican" (Matt. 18:17), and Paul's reference to delivering blasphemers "over to Satan" (I Tim. 1:20) certainly does not mean turning them over to civil magistrates or the executioner. The most that the New Testament authorizes a Christian church, or its officers, to do is to expel unworthy persons from membership. Even so, they are still men, still members of civil society, and therefore not liable to civil penalties unless they have also offended the laws of the state.[54]

Finally, Priestley points out that Balguy's argument that Christian ministers require state financial support in order to avoid "slavish dependence" upon the voluntary contributions of their parishioners[55] contradicts the spirit of the New Testament. Jesus certainly believed that his disciples were worthy of support, but he used this very reason to argue that his disciples ought not to concern themselves about provision for the morrow (Matt. 10:8-10); referring, one must suppose, to the trust they might reasonably place in Divine Providence to meet the needs of those in its service. The apostle Peter rejected Simon Magus' attempt to purchase an "alliance" with the spiritual power of the disciples (Acts 8:18-20), and Paul did not apply to the civil magistrate, but turned to manual labor when church support was insufficient. Only those who remain financially independent of the state are free to obey God rather than man.[56]

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[53] Ibid., p. 86.

[54] Ibid., p. 76.

[55] Balguy, op. cit., p. 16.

But how, then, did the alliance of church and state, so contrary to primitive Christianity, arise? Priestley gave his answer in An History of the Corruptions of Christianity. When the church found itself increasingly torn by conflicting theological opinions and schisms in the post apostolic period, the temptation grew to use stronger disciplinary measures than mere expulsion from membership, namely, such temporal penalties as exile and imprisonment, which, however, only the state could impose. The first known instance of the use of civil power in settling church affairs occurred when a Christian synod requested and secured the aid of the heathen emperor Aurelian in expelling Paul of Samosata from his episcopal residence; but it was only when Constantine made Christianity the established religion of the empire that civil interference in the church became widespread. Desire to suppress heresy and schism, enjoyment of power and prestige, longing for revenge upon their pagan persecutors now had opportunity for fulfillment through the aid of the state, and the church proved unable to resist temptation.[57]

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[56] Ibid., pp. 107-08.

Priestley gives a lengthy account of the ways in which civil and ecclesiastical authority have co-operated to regulate religious affairs through the course of European history,[58] and although we shall not repeat it, it is worth noting that although he judges Roman Catholicism harshly for its use of civil power, he is equally critical of Protestantism. He also notes that "at all times there have been advocates for moderation among very zealous Papists," notably Thomas Aquinas, who maintained that religion ought not to be extended by force.[59] In fact, it was English Protestantism, under the headship of Henry VIII, which first dared to place religious affairs completely in the hands of secular power.[60]

Priestley's concrete proposals for reform in the _Essay on First Principles_, considering his strong theoretical arguments against any establishment at all, seem surprisingly mild; but, then, he is aware that one must, in making specific proposals for action, consider what is actually possible. The immediate overthrow of all establishments is not only impossible, but might cause anarchy.[61] Besides, Divine Providence has apparently chosen to move gradually in removing establishments, and men ought, so far as possible, to move neither slower nor faster.[62] In light of all this, Priestley suggests the following reforms in contemporary Europe: (1) Reduce the articles of faith required of candidates for ordination in the established church to the simple affirmation of faith "in the religion of *Jesus Christ* as it is set forth in the New Testament." (2) Make the stipends of the clergy more equal and strictly proportionate to the work required. (3) Take away all civil power from the clergy, or, at least, grant it only to those who are fairly elected to government posts like anyone else. (4) Grant the full rights of citizenship, including the right to hold office, to all, regardless of their religion, and extend toleration, including freedom to preach and publish, to everyone, even heathens and atheists.

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[57] _An History of the Corruptions of Christianity_, V, 327-33.

[58] _Ibid._, pp. 333-44, 372-436.

[59] _Ibid._, p. 339.

[60] _Ibid._, pp. 426-27. The Act of Supremacy (1534) declared the king to be "supreme head in earth of the Church of England" with unqualified legislative, administrative, and judicial power over the English church. Nevertheless, the king was not a priest, he could not ordain, and although he could repress heresy, he could not declare dogma. See G. B. Adams and H. M. Stephens, _Select Documents of English Constitutional History_ (New York: Macmillan Co., 1929), pp. 239-40.

Implementation of these measures, Priestley believes, will reduce the temptation to hypocrisy and preoccupation with worldly power among the clergy, give citizens otherwise disaffected and rebellious because of religious discrimination a stake in preserving the government, and, most important, offer an opportunity to prove that the less the state has to do with religion the better for both.[63]

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[61] *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, XXII, 95.

[62] *Ibid*., p. 125.

[63] *Ibid*., pp. 95-97.

2. The Battle for Religious Liberty

In the years that followed the publication of the Essay on First Principles Priestley became a leading spokesman for the Dissenters in their struggle to widen toleration and to achieve full religious liberty.[64] When Sir William Blackstone, the leading jurist of the day, declared in Commentaries on the Laws of England (1769), that the penalties for Dissent were only "suspended" by the Toleration Act,[65] and that to revile the ordinances of the Established Church was "a crime of much grosser nature than mere nonconformity,"[66] Priestley promptly made a heated reply.[67] He expressed the fear that since Blackstone was "supposed to possess the confidence of the present ministry, his sentiments must be considered as a notification to Dissenters what light they are regarded in by those who are in power."[68] To view Dissent, as Blackstone's statement implies, as a crime could lead easily to the establishment of a system of "civil and ecclesiastical tyranny," but, fortunately, no "set of men who are in their senses" could possibly accept such an opinion.[69] No citizens are more deeply attached to their king and country than the Dissenters, none more devoted to the British constitution.[70] And the simple fact that no penalties were attached to nonconformity *per se* by the Act of Toleration proves that it is not a crime.[71] As to the charge that criticism of the Established Church is also illegal, Priestley pointed out that this, in effect, denies Dissenters freedom to defend their fundamental beliefs, which necessarily involves criticism of that which they oppose.[72]

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[64] A recent detailed account of this struggle is given in R. B. Barlow, Citizenship and Conscience (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962). See also A. Lincoln, op. cit.

[65] The so-called "Toleration Act," passed by Parliament in 1689 as part of the Revolutionary Settlement, "exempted" from the penalties against non-Anglican worship imposed by the Tudor and Stuart statutes of uniformity all those who took the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, signed a declaration against the doctrine of transubstantiation, and subscribed to the doctrinal provisions of the Thirty Nine Articles. See Adams and Stephens, op. cit., pp. 459-62.

[66] W. Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1769), IV, 53.

[67] Remarks on Some Paragraphs in the Fourth Volume of Dr. Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, Relating to the Dissenters [1769], XXII, 302-28.

[68] Ibid., p. 302.

Blackstone responded at once by insisting that:

> Nonconformity is still a crime by the Laws of England and has heavy penalties annexed to it notwithstanding the Act of Toleration (nay, expressly reserved by that Act, Sect. 16,) in all such as do not comply with the conditions thereby enjoined.[73]

Again, Priestley replied in a letter to the press:

> You have not convinced me that *mere nonconformity* is a crime in the Laws of England. I apprehend it to have been no offence at common law and that, since all penalties inflicted by particular acts of Parliament are declared by the Act of Toleration not to extend to those who comply with the terms of that act, that such persons are in no sense criminal.[74]

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[69] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 321.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 323.

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 307.

[73] W. Blackstone, *A Reply to Dr. Priestley's Remarks on the Fourth Volume of the Commentaries on the Laws of England* (London, 1769), p. 11, quoted by the editor of Priestley's *Works*, XXII, 330-31.

[74] *An Answer to Dr. Blackstone's Reply* [St. James's Chronicle, Oct. 10, 1769, No. 1344, p. 2], XXII, 328-34.

Here the exchange ended, although Priestley followed it up with a tract offering a fuller defense of Dissenters as "good subjects."[75] To be sure, he admitted, he, as a Dissenter, rejected state control of his religious affairs.

> But notwithstanding this, as an inhabitant of this world, I value my life, my liberty, my property, and my ease, as much as any other man; and therefore I shall have as sincere an affection for a system of laws and government that can secure them to me, as any other person whatever.[76]

Besides, Dissenters have special reason to be loyal to the British constitution and present reigning family, because they enjoy, comparatively speaking, greater liberty under them.[77]

When a number of the leaders of Dissent joined in a concerted effort in 1772-1773 to persuade Parliament to relieve their ministers of subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles, and to substitute a simple affirmation of faith in the divine authority of Scripture, Priestley urged them to press for the removal of all restrictions on religious opinion.

> You have hitherto preferred your prayer as Christians; stand forth now in the character of _men_, and ask at once for the repeal of all the penal laws which respect matters of opinion.[78]

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[75] _A View of the Principles and Conduct of the Protestant Dissenters, with respect to the Civil and Ecclesiastical Constitution of England_ [1769], XXII, 335-79.

[76] _Ibid._, p. 351.

[77] _Ibid._, pp. 351-52.

[78] _A Letter of Advice to Those Dissenters Who Conduct the Application to Parliament for Relief from Certain Penal Laws, with Various Observations Relating to Similar Subjects. By the Author of the "Free Address to Protestant Dissenters as such"_ [1773], XXII, 442.

Surely they do not wish to be protected from dangers to which unbelievers would still be exposed, or appear so distrustful of Christianity's capacity to prevail on the basis of free inquiry alone.[79] Moreover, it is in the interest of the nation not to deprive itself of the services of capable men merely on account of their religious beliefs. Therefore, Dissent should press for universal toleration and for removal of the Test and Corporation Acts as well.[80]

Still, Priestley admitted that even such a modest measure as these leaders proposed was a step forward.

> If we be compelled to believe only *thirty-four and a half*, instead of *thirty-five and a half* of the thirty-nine articles, *something will be gained, and we* shall have one evil less to complain of; and if we thus move on at the rate of an article, or only half an article a year, the years will count more pleasantly than they have done.[81]

The effort for Relief failed in 1772-1773, but Parliament did grant it in 1779. However, by then the general body of Dissent had already begun to press for the more comprehensive demands for religious liberty advocated by Priestley; and in March, 1787, its parliamentary leaders presented a bill for repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts to the Commons. Supporters of the bill argued that the Dissenters were loyal subjects who had neither designs against the endowments of the Established Church nor plans to overthrow the constitution. But Sir William Dolben, a representative from Oxford, shouted "Nonsense!" and proceeded to cite Priestley's writings as evidence to the contrary, quoting with particular effect Priestley's remark that:

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[79] *Ibid.*, pp. 442-43.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 451. These acts, dating back to 1673 and 1661, respectively, barred Dissenters from civil office. See Adams and Stephens, *op. cit.*, pp. 425-27, 436-39.

[81] *Letter . . . Dissenters . . . Relief from Certain Penal Laws*, XXII, 445.

> We are, as it were, laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame so as to produce an instantaneous explosion; in consequence of which, that edifice, the erection of which has been the work of ages, may be overturned in a moment, and so effectually as that the same foundation can never be built upon again.[82]

William Pitt, then Prime Minister, opposed the bill on grounds that it was inexpedient to repeal laws which might undermine political and ecclesiastical stability, and the motion was defeated 178 votes to 100.

Only three days after the debate Priestley published a lengthy open letter to the Prime Minister. In it he disavowed any desire by Dissenters to overthrow establishments by violence.

> The *gunpowder* which we are so assiduously laying *grain by grain under the old building of error and superstition* . . . is not composed of saltpetre, charcoal, and sulphur, but consists of *arguments*.[83]

A Christianity restored to its "pristine purity and its pristine vigour" will prevail without reliance upon any force save that of reason aided by free inquiry.[84] However, his accusation that Pitt opposed repeal only for the sake of personal political gain[85] and that his arguments lacked "mature consideration"[86] (Pitt was twenty-eight at the time) could hardly have made Priestley's views more palatable to the government. Nor doubtless did his frank proposals for other reforms in addition to repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts: opening of Oxford and Cambridge to Dissenters, removal of clergy from membership in the House of Lords, abolition of compulsory payment of tithes, reform of clerical salaries, disestablishment of Protestantism in Ireland, reduction of the numbers and ranks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[87] Despite his disavowal of violence, he closed on a note of unmistakable militancy:

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[82] *Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in This Country*, XVIII, 544.

[83] *A Letter to the Right Hon. William Pitt*, XIX, 121.

[84] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

> Much, Sir, very much, is to be done in this country; and in due time there will not be wanting men who will have the head, the heart, and the firmness of nerve to do it.[88]

Another attempt to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts was made in the spring of 1789, and this time failed passing by only twenty votes. The outbreak of the French Revolution in the following summer and the consequent emancipation of all religious minorities by the French National Assembly stirred the Dissenters to launch yet a third effort at repeal in 1790. Past failures were forgotten, in the words of Anthony Lincoln, "before the happenings upon the Continent; before the miracle of the Lord raising up liberty out of the land of despotism and Popery."[89] Repeal now seemed certain; only a matter of days or weeks. "The period," wrote Priestley's Roman Catholic neighbor Joseph Berington, "cannot be distant: France has set the example."[90] But as news of revolutionary excesses grew, terror of social and ecclesiastical leveling infected the defenders of the established order, and when Charles James Fox introduced the Repeal Bill in March, 1790, it was rejected 294 votes to 105, the largest majority ever recorded against repeal.[91]

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[85] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[87] *Ibid.*, pp. 127-31.

[88] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

The defeat signalized the beginning of the prevalence of a reactionary mood in English political life which was to continue into the eighteen twenties. Its greatest spokesman was Edmund Burke, who, in arguing against repeal, frankly admitted that he would have voted differently ten years ago, but that confronted with the fact that Dissent now seemed to sympathize with the revolutionary upheavals in France, he could only oppose such a measure as dangerous to public order.[92] Burke's classic defense of the established order, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was published in the fall of 1790. Although it was in part an answer to Richard Price's enthusiastic endorsement of the Revolution in a *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789), Price, in the six months remaining before his death, made no reply. But his defense was taken up by, among others, his intimate friend, Priestley.

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[89] Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

[90] Quoted in *ibid*.

[91] *Ibid*., p. 266.

[92] Barlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-70.

Priestley's Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France[93] was his last major statement on the issue of church and state.[94] His basic position remained the same, but now the note of urgency--and the bitterness--became even more intense. He denounced Burke, an old friend, for deserting the cause of civil and religious liberty, and declared his inability to understand how one who had heretofore supported the Dissenters' efforts to obtain relief from subscription[95] and had supported the American Revolution could now zealously defend the present establishment and attack the revolution in France.[96] Surely it must be obvious to him that in America, which he has observed for so long, and "in every other part of the known world, except the southern part of this particular island," that all civil offices are open to everyone regardless of his religious persuasion without causing any inconvenience to government.[97] In answer to Burke's assertion that an established religion is necessary in order to remind a state's rulers that their own wills are not the standard of right and wrong, but that they are responsible to the moral authority of a Higher Power, Priestley replied that no one can respect the moral authority of a religion which depends upon state support.[98] Burke's basic error, Priestley told him, is that repeatedly "you . . . confound *religion* with the *civil establishment* of it, and hence the manifest inconclusiveness of your whole argument."[99]

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[93] Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, XXII, 145-244. It went through three editions in one year.

[94] Although he did reiterate similar points in An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham, XIX, 402-26.

[95] In 1772-1773. See Barlow, op. cit., pp. 176-77, 186-87.

[96] Letters to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke, XXII, 147.

[97] Ibid., p. 148.

Most striking in these *Letters* is Priestley's increased hostility toward the Established Church and his insistence on its immediate abolition. He no longer speaks, as in the *Essay on First Principles* of twenty years earlier, of gradual reform. In one of the most forceful passages he ever wrote, he declares:

> Now when I see this *fungus* of an establishment upon the noble plant of Christianity, draining its best juices; when I see this *sloth* upon its stately branches, gnawing it, and stripping it bare; or, to change my comparison, when I see the *glutton* upon the shoulders of this noble animal, the blood flowing down, and its very vitals in danger; if I wish to preserve the tree, or the animal, must I not, without delay, extirpate the fungus, destroy the sloth, and kill the glutton? Indeed, Sir, say, or write, what you please, such vermin deserve no mercy. You may stand by, and weep for the fate of your favourite fungus, your sloth, or your glutton, but I shall not spare them.[100]

As for the French Revolution, it is, Priestley asserts, the prelude to "a totally new, a most wonderful and important aera in the history of mankind . . . a change from darkness to light, from superstition to sound knowledge, and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom."[101] The Revolution is ushering in a time when government will be inexpensive and its activities restricted to serving the public good, civil liberty will flourish, peace will be universal and perpetual, imperialism will end, commerce and industry will flourish, establishments will fall, and true religion will establish itself on its own evidence. All this was, of course, "distinctly and repeatedly foretold in many prophecies, delivered more than two thousand years ago."[102]

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[98] *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

As Basil Willey poignantly observes, "In our own bad days it is perhaps the 'happiness' of these men, rather than their disappointment, which leaves us mourning."[103]

As the Revolution began to disgrace itself, the rising tide of public opinion throughout England against any form of radicalism, especially when it was associated with the hated name of France, saw in "Gunpowder Priestley" an obvious target for its rage. On the night of July 14, 1791, a mob, shouting "Church and King," burnt the two Dissenting chapels in Birmingham and then sacked Priestley's house, including his extensive library and well-equipped laboratory. Priestley and his family fled by chaise with only the clothes on their backs.[104] His unpopularity did not decrease and three years later he migrated to America where he continued to hope for the fulfillment of his eschatological expectations.[105]

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[101] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 237-44.

[103] Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

[104] See Priestley's own account in *An Appeal to the Public, on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham*, Part I, XIX, 359-83, and a detailed account in Holt, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-74.

The decisive defeat of the effort to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts in 1790 ended significant efforts to alter the English arrangement of church and state until the late eighteen twenties. No doubt Priestley's sharp expressions of hostility toward establishments, particularly since they were the opinions of a notorious theological radical and sympathizer with the French Revolution, irritated and frightened defenders of the status quo; so that, in this sense, one could argue that Priestley delayed the achievement of religious liberty in England. On the other hand, one should also point out that his forceful arguments in behalf of fullfledged religious liberty helped to move Dissenting opinion away from the complacent acceptance of limited toleration which characterized it at the middle of the century toward the demand for full citizenship before the law.

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[105] Supra, pp. 175-76.

PART IV

CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF "CANDOUR"

Since we have already attempted to evaluate the principal elements in Priestley's theology in the course of our exposition, we will not recapitulate those particular judgments here. Nevertheless, one may still ask whether Priestley's apologetic labor, viewed as a totality, was successful.

In one sense the answer is clearly No. Christianity did eventually prevail over the eighteenth century upsurge of infidelity, but it was by means and in a spirit quite different from those embodied in Priestley's appeal to the empirical evidences for supernatural intervention. Kant's "Copernican revolution" in epistemology and the appeal to "feeling" advocated by Schleiermacher combined with the conservative reaction against the French Revolution and the success of revivalistic techniques to alter radically the whole approach to apologetics. A prominent instance of this change in religious attitudes is provided by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, in his youth, was an admirer of Priestley and was preparing to enter the Unitarian ministry when Priestley left England in 1794; but who, by the end of the century, under the influence of German Idealism and the Romantic movement in literature, was moving toward a quite different religious orientation. Priestley among the Dissenters, like William Paley, his theological counterpart within the Establishment, stands, in this sense, not only at the end of a century, but at the end of an intellectual era.

And yet, as we have tried to show, Priestley, in the course of attempting to make Christianity intellectually acceptable to the Enlightenment, made a number of contributions to the development of Christian thought. He helped to prepare the way for the application of the critical-historical method to the study of the Scriptures by arguing that to treat them like any other histories--the work of fallible men--rather than as infallible communications from the Holy Spirit was not to weaken faith, but to relieve it of an indefensible position. In the course of his own study of the Bible he anticipated the form critical theory of the origin of the gospels and pointed out the dubious historicity of the nativity stories. Against the leading spokesmen for religious skepticism in the England of his day--Hume and Gibbon--it cannot be said that he prevailed, but he did expose difficulties in Hume's attack on miracles and he also made plain that Gibbon's portrayal of early Christianity was something less than fair. His effort to prove that primitive Christology was Unitarian, although it sometimes led him to strained or erroneous interpretations of the evidence, nevertheless demonstrated the importance of historical knowledge for theological understanding. He begged an important question by dismissing all doctrinal developments as corruptions, but he did show that theology is conditioned by cultural circumstances, and that to understand the full significance of a doctrine, one must know something of the historical forces which shaped it. He himself pointed to the profound impact of Hellenistic thought upon early Christianity. He was also a forceful advocate of materialism, but while others were arguing that materialism necessarily leads to atheism, Priestley sought to reconcile it with biblical religion. He rightly saw that the notion of an immaterial, immortal soul is foreign to the biblical view of man, and that resurrection of the flesh, not immortality of the soul, is the biblical view of the future life. Finally, Priestley set out an array of powerful arguments for religious liberty which helped to prepare the way for the modern pattern of church-state relations.

Perhaps the primary reason for the measure of success he achieved was the spirit with which he approached his task, a spirit which he himself summarized under the term "candour." In the introduction to the published edition of his correspondence with Richard Price on materialism and necessity, which he considered to be a model of candid controversy, Priestley defined such a spirit as one in which "we never impute to our adversary a *bad intention* or a *design to mislead*," although we may feel that his position is entirely mistaken.[1] His chief complaint about the critics of *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* was their "want of that *candour* without which there can be no true judgments of the real value of any work of man."[2] Candour, then, means avoiding *ad*

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[1] *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism*, IV, 14.

[2] *A Reply to the Animadversions on The History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, XVIII, 6.

hominem arguments and concentrating upon whether or not a particular idea is true. This, in turn, means remaining open to whatever opinions are offered on a given subject and reaching one's decision on the basis of rational consideration of the evidence.[3] The student of religious thought, like a good scientist, will examine all the phenomena, including the testimony of unbelievers as well as believers, without succumbing to the influence of passion,[4] and he will remain willing to alter a previously held position whenever new evidence arises to refute it.[5]

For Priestley this meant that one was free to investigate even the most sacred and most potentially explosive topics. The devout believer whose faith is securely based need not fear the controversy which inevitably results from such investigation, because he can be sure that out of the clash of opinions "truth will, in the end, be a gainer."[6] Even the asperity which often occurs in controversial writing has a beneficial effect in that men are thereby roused to give the very best possible defense of their opinions with the result that the debated subject is that much more thoroughly explored.[7]

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[3] Priestley gave concrete expression to this conviction when he established the *Theological Repository*, which he declared to be open to all, including unbelievers. "The Introduction," *TR* I, 1769 , VII, 519-20.

[4] *Observations on the Increase of Infidelity*, XVII, 11.

[5] *Letters to Dr. Horsley*, XVIII, 43.

[6] *A Reply to the Animadversions on The History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, XVIII, 4.

[7] *A Letter to Jacob Bryant, Esq. in Defence of Philosophical Necessity* 1780 , IV, 225.

Priestley admitted that his belief in the value of debate led him to write more than was good for his literary reputation, but, he said, "My object is not reputation, . . . but the careful investigation, and the most effectual propagation of truth; and for this purpose, I am willing to lay hold of every fair opportunity of bringing it again and again before the public."[8]

At the height of the controversy over the *History of Corruptions* Priestley summarized his attitude:

> My object, I trust, is *truth*. I shall pursue it with fairness, and without fear of consequences, and I shall consider every man as acting with me who shall aid me in the pursuit.[9]

It was this spirit, combined with a seemingly limitless capacity for work, which enabled Priestley to make the contributions to theological knowledge (and to so many other fields) that he did. Perhaps, he himself put it best:

> God has pleased to give me an active, and I hope an honest mind; and when a man is always busily seeking, with his eyes fairly open, and especially in places where others are afraid to go, he will sometimes find things worth looking for, and that had escaped more timid researchers.[10]

The author's hope is that this attempt to give an objective, historical exposition of Priestley's theology will contribute to a fuller appreciation of Priestley's importance in the history of Christian thought. It is also his hope that this account of Priestley's defense of religion against the intellectual challenges of his time will contribute to a broader historical understanding of the issues at stake during those eighteenth century years when God was on trial.

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[8] *A Reply to the Animadversions on The History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, XVIII, 4.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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THESIS PRECIS

Joseph Priestley's principal concern was to defend what he considered to be genuine Christianity against the "philosophical unbelievers" of the eighteenth century. His apologetic program was twofold: to purge Christianity of the "corruptions" which made it repugnant to thoughtful persons and to provide evidence for its essential tenets. Although troubled by the increase in infidelity which characterized the latter part of the eighteenth century, Priestley welcomed the challenge it posed as an opportunity to clarify and strengthen true religion.

Priestley relied upon reason, Scripture, and history to discern and establish pure Christianity. By "reason" he sometimes meant *a priori* arguments, but more often he meant *a posteriori* arguments derived from nature; *a posteriori* arguments from history he made a separate category. He employed the familiar devices of natural theology to defend religion, but he frankly acknowledged that the light of nature was not sufficiently bright to establish belief without the aid of the special revealed truths recorded in Scripture and confirmed by historical investigation. The intellectual, moral, and aesthetic superiority of the books of the Bible, when compared with other religious and philosophical literatures, provided, he believed, internal evidence that the former contain authentic revelation; however, he rejected biblical infallibility as an encumbrance on the apologetic effort. The authors of Scripture made numerous errors of interpretation because of their limited scientific and historical knowledge; nevertheless, they left faithful eyewitness accounts of the principal events upon which Christianity is founded.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, historical knowledge was highly valued as a means to moral and philosophical truth. Priestley found this appeal to history congenial to his own empiricism and rested his case for pure Christianity primarily upon "historical evidences." He argued for the historicity of miracles--the chief external evidence for revelation--against Hume; he appealed to history for proof of the fulfillment of prophecy against Collins; he maintained against Gibbon that only supernatural causes could account for the rise of Christianity; history demonstrated Christianity's superior moral effects; and finally, it explained how the pure, simple religion of Jesus became corrupt. Certain points made by Priestley in the course of these debates with unbelievers remain valid, but he was handicapped by a lack of a genuine sense of historical change. His tendency was to assume that persons of all eras shared the outlook of enlightened eighteenth century citizens.

Three issues occupied the central place in Priestley's efforts to purge Christianity of its corruptions: (1) the Divine Unity and simple humanity of Jesus; (2) the material nature of man and the related doctrine of necessity; (3) religious liberty.

Against numerous opponents, but particularly the Anglican ecclesiastic, Samuel Horsley, Priestley maintained that primitive

Christianity was Unitarian in theology. He offered logical and biblical arguments, but his major point was that present orthodox Trinitarian and Christological doctrine resulted from the efforts of early apologists to make Christianity intellectually acceptable to the Hellenistic world of thought.

Priestley carried David Hartley's movement toward a strictly physiological psychology to completion; he advocated a thoroughgoing materialism. He went on to maintain that the traditional belief in an immaterial, immortal soul was not only inconsistent with natural evidence, but also with the Scriptures. He argued that the original Christian belief was in an eschatological bodily resurrection from the dead. Priestley believed that only a rigid determinism was consistent with a materialistic view of man, but he attempted to retain the meaningfulness of moral responsibility.

Priestley also urged the political and religious benefits of complete religious liberty. Although his outspokenness probably hampered the Dissenters' efforts to gain repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in the eighteenth century, his writings helped to move Dissent away from a complacent acceptance of toleration toward demand for full religious freedom.

Priestley's type of apologetics did not prevail in the succeeding century, for various reasons, but in the course of his labors he made numerous contributions to theology. He remains distinguished for his devotion to continuing inquiry in the pursuit of religious truth.

Biographical Outline of Lloyd W. Chapin, Jr.

Born: January 7, 1937, Atlanta, Georgia.

Education: Graduated from E. Rivers Grammar School, Atlanta, Georgia, 1949.

Graduated from North Fulton High School, Atlanta, Georgia, 1954.

Graduated from Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina, 1958, B.A.

Graduated from Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1961, B.D.

Th.D. candidate, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1961--

Married to the former Louise Medora Williams, June 21, 1958.

Three children: Laura Louise Chapin, Mary Caroline Chapin, Lloyd W. Chapin, III.

Ordained elder in The Methodist Church, June, 1961, Atlanta, Georgia.

Currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Colgate University, Hamilton, N. Y.